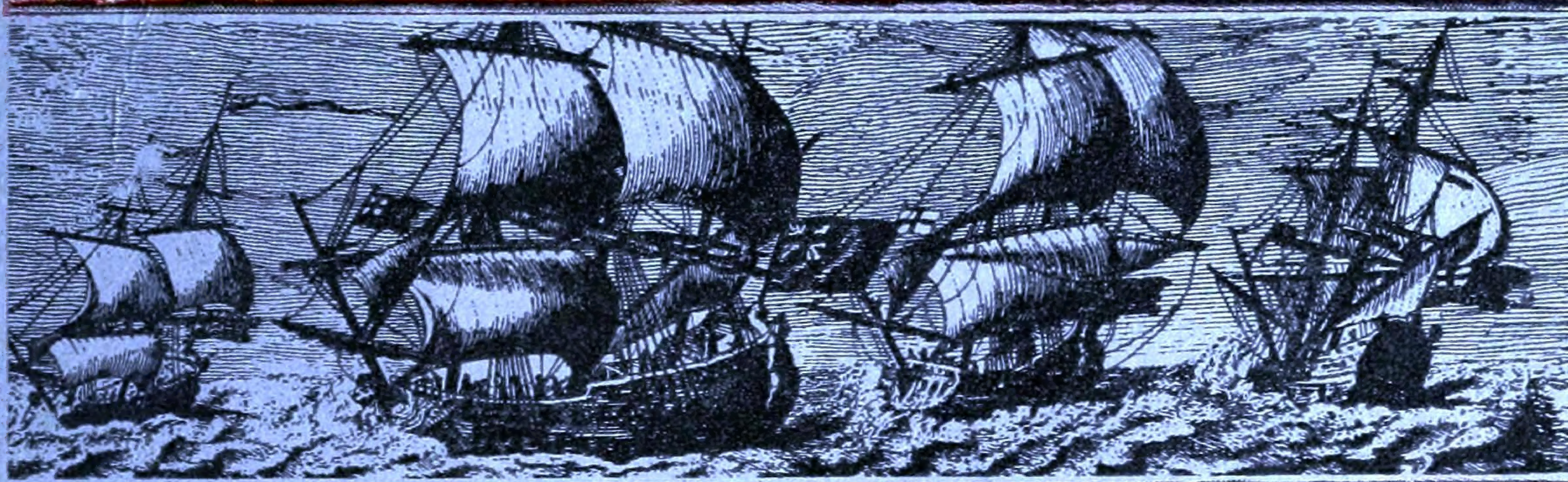




HE FOUGHT FOR QUEEN, FOR COUNTRY AND FOR  
THE LOVE OF THE PASSIONATE WOMAN  
HE WAS FORBIDDEN TO MARRY.

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1237

# CAPTAIN SEADOG



ORIGINAL  
NOVEL  
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JEFFERSON COOPER





## SECRETS IN THE BOUDOIR...

Lady Harriet Brampton pressed her body closer. "You say your name is William Parker," she teased. "Yet I believe it to be something else."

A stab of fear went through Michael Goddard. Then he realized this wanton "lady" spoke in jest.

Goddard had come in disguise to Lady Harriet's boudoir seeking the secret hiding place of a diary containing information which would clear him of the charges against him and prove him a hero to Queen and country.

One false move and Michael was as good as dead. Yet, as his hand reached to loosen the strings of her bodice, he could not resist saying, "I agree, madam, we all have our secrets."

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**CAPTAIN  
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## CAPTAIN SEADOG

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# Captain Seadog







# Chapter One

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MICHAEL GODDARD cursed the dying wind and the barnacles on the keel boards of his *Devon Rose* as it wallowed in the heaving swells of the Atlantic. He swore at the fates that had let him come this close to home and England before deserting him. Bracing himself on the poop deck within reaching distance of the stern lanthorn, he brooded at the two Spanish galleons bearing down on him off the starboard quarter with all sails spread.

The November day was cold and raw with a threat of rain in the dark thunderheads off to windward. Less than an hour before, a masthead lookout had shouted the warning and pointed into the offshore breeze to direct the aiming of his spyglass.

He had hoped these might be English vessels come to welcome him home, but that hope had died at the sight of the golden tower of Castile and the red lion of Aragon on the ships' mainmast pennons. They were broad of beam as every Spanish ship was broad, with bulbous gilt woodwork at stern cabins and bowsprits. Along each rail his glass picked out fifteen guns. Twin long toms peered at him from the galleon foredecks. There would be similar eighteen-pounders jutting from below the stern cabins. Outnumbered and outgunned, with his men exhausted from the long ocean voyage—they'd raised anchor off the Mosquito Coast of Central America four weeks ago—he was in no position to fight.

"And I can't run," he muttered, thinking of the jewels in the wooden caskets beneath the bedstead of his cabin. "My keel is foul with marine growths."

Aside from the diamonds and rubies taken from the Span-



ish plate fleets during the past two years, the ship's hold was laden with giant gold chains and statues of raw red gold, magnificent crosses studded with emeralds and rubies together with long ropes of milk-white pearls. He'd been homing toward Queen Elizabeth and England in this year of 1586 with enough of a fortune to buy a kingdom. Now he'd never get there.

"Hard over the tiller," he roared at the whipstaff hutch.

His only chance to catch what wind there was lay in the courses at mainmast and foremast. He would drop the bonnet and the triangular lateen as well. The *Devon Rose* answered sluggishly, pitching in the trough of a wave before nosing about, shedding water at bow and trail boards. The galleons were appreciably nearer, less than a mile off the starboard quarter.

His mate, a wiry little Cornishman, came running from the main deck. There was despair in his black eyes as he scrambled up the ladder to where Michael stood. "One of our stern cannon's cracked, Cap'n!"

"The other?"

"Oh aye, the other's well enough. But——"

"Load her. I'll sight her myself. Order the crew to stand to battle stations."

His gaze ran the length of the *Devon Rose*. The big ship was painted a sober black now, but two years ago she had been the thousand-ton galleon *Encarnación* out of Cadiz, all red and gilt but without that customary shallow hull that made Spanish ships so clumsy in a sea fight. He'd exchanged shot with her during a running battle off Cap François. When the waves and riptide impaled his English-built *Devon Rose* on the jagged rocks that lay like dragons' teeth all along the coast of Hispaniola, he'd tumbled his crew into three small-boats and boarded the *Encarnación*. It had been cutlass and rapier then, with a pistol barrel in the face on a deck awash with thundering waves before the Spanish captain surrendered.

"If only we had the wind to side us," Michael groaned, and struck the wooden capping of the poop-deck rail with a fist.

"Aye," rumbled his Cornish mate, who called himself



Black Mark. "Do ye mind the gale we took the *Todos Santos* in? Blowing so hard we had to lash ourselves to the cannon to keep from bein' swept oversides."

They saw the puff of smoke from a foredeck gun of the nearer Spaniard an instant before they heard its muffled, flat report. A geyser of water rose into the air twenty feet astern. Michael smiled coldly, eyes touching the gun crews on his main deck, knowing the long toms forward were manned and ready.

"The stern tom?" he asked crisply.

"Ready to let go, Cap'n," said Black Mark.

"We'll let them have two more shots. They'll need at least five before they hit us, Spanish marksmanship being what it is."

The Cornishman looked dubious and pointed a gnarled finger at the single row of dipping oars on either side of the closer vessel. "That galleass don't need five tries. She'll soon be close enough to aim a ball down our throats. I'll say this fer 'em, the Spaniards are smart to build a ship like that, half galleon wi' its sails, half galleass wi' its oars. They need never depend on the wind as we do."

"They have to carry food for a hundred galley slaves. That extra weight slows them down when the wind is blowing."

"Like she ain't doing now," the Cornishman muttered glumly.

On their third try, a Spanish ball struck the mizzenmast between yards and heel. There was a cracking of seasoned timber, a rustle of falling sail, the tortured wail of snapping cordage. The broken mast thudded on the quarter-deck planking. Spanish cheers came clearly across the water.

Black Mark was knee-deep in the wreckage, slashing hemp ropes and sail tatters with a curving dagger. His voice—amazingly deep for such a little man—yanked his deck crews up by the seat of their breeks and sent them headlong into the wreckage. Moments later the broken masthead was being heaved overside and the mizzen and bonnet folded for storage.

The Spanish long tom roared again.

As the ball splashed into the sea half a yard from the



starboard bulwark timbers, Michael Goddard dropped from the poop deck onto the quarter-deck. The Cornishman came after him, waving his gun crews back to their stations. Michael took the main-deck cabins on the run, moving between the wooden bunks of the officers' quarters and past a storage locker to the tiller flat.

The tiller flat was a small room directly under the captain's cabin fitted with twin wooden windows which could be swung outward to permit a gun crew to work the long toms. Only one eighteen-pounder stood for firing now; the other had been pushed back against the bulwark timbers. Three crewmen waited beside the brass culverin. One of them was blowing on a smoking igniter. He blew harder when he saw his captain. A tiny flame jumped to life and held as Michael reached for the taper. Overhead the long round tiller rod swung back and forth with a creak and groan of anguished wood.

"Powder poured, ball in the breech, sir."

Michael nodded and sank to a knee behind the cannon. He sighted along the corrugated iron barrel at the big red ship that was less than three cable lengths away, using the lifting rings to frame the *Felipe Rey* on the upper edge of the muzzle guard. He blew a moment on the waxed taper, then held it to the touchhole.

There was a flash of powder, a thunderous roar. The iron bombard kicked back hard against the ropes that held it.

"Load away," said Michael.

Over the shoulders of the laboring gun crew he saw the heavy ball hit the foreboards of the red ship as a wave lifted the *galea* high. Before he could learn whether the shot had glanced off the wet bulwark timbers or crushed them, the *Felipe Rey* dipped into the green waters and surged forward with undiminished speed.

"A miss," he said calmly.

The ball was in the breech and powder was flowing in a black river from a wooden keg. Black Mark slapped a hand to the keg, thrusting it up and aside. He blew on the taper a moment, then gave it to his captain.

Michael crouched, judging distance, the lift and fall of the



ships. A corner of his mind took this incongruous moment to remember other days and other years when he had sailed these same waters in a herring smack, working with his father and two older brothers out of Sutton Pool, dragging their nets and wiping salt spray from their faces when a sea squall struck. He had been a boy in those dimly remembered years. Today he was a man, heavily muscled but lithe, with brawny shoulders and lean waist, his yellow hair close-cropped to his skull in sailor fashion. Wryly he told himself he would be a dead man if he did not concentrate on what he was doing.

Ah, now! Now while the big red ship was framed just as he wanted her on a lifting wave. The flaming taper met the touchhole. Michael stepped nimbly aside as the long tom belched smoke and flame, jerking backward until the guy ropes hummed with its weight.

The Cornishman shouted, "Lookee, Cap'n! A hole in her foreboard timbers. She ships water!"

Michael grinned mirthlessly, showing white teeth behind tawny beard stubble. "She'll slow a little now, despite her oar banks."

Black Mark frowned. "Will she slow enough?"

"Enough for what I mean to do. Have a man lower away the tender and place two kegs of gunpowder between the seats. Tell him to cover them with canvas sacking."

The little man cocked a curious eye. "You're up to deviltry, Michael. I'm going with you."

"You'll stay to fight for the *Devon Rose*. I've more than three million guineas in gold and jewels on this ship. I don't mean to let the Spaniards have it—nor the ocean bottom, either." He drew a deep breath. "Now listen to me, little man. See you follow instructions to the letter. Break out my sea chest . . ."

He continued to talk as he led the way to his cabin below the poop deck. Within moments he was stripped to cotton breeches. His chest was deep and heavily ridged with muscle, very white from waist to shoulders where a V of brown flesh showed the years of exposure to a tropic sun. His arms were long and powerful. There was the deceptive grace of a jungle cat in Michael Goddard; he moved so fluidly as he dressed



that he seemed not to move at all, yet he was clad in black velvet breeks with his legs thrust into bucket boots of red cordovan leather before Black Mark could rise from his kneeling position before the ironbound sea chest.

The Cornishman was grumbling, "—a mort of trouble to pull some trick that may cost your life! Why not just fight it out?"

Michael caught his mate and swung him close, pointing toward the stern windows. "Use your head! We're outnumbered. They have three times our weight of guns. Those damned oars give them a mobility we don't have, without wind. If the *Felipe Rey* closes with us we're done for. If the other ship—*El Gran Grifon*—comes up on our other quarter while we're fighting the red ship, we'll be like a wheat grain between two millstones!"

The *Devon Rose* shuddered, lost headway. In a moment she was surging forward, but now they could hear a man screaming in agony from the main deck and the thudding of bare feet across its boards. Michael said tonelessly, "You'll do what I say or this night we'll burn in Hell."

From the cabin bulwarks Michael yanked two rapiers. One he tossed to the Cornishman. Head lowered, he plunged through the companionway to the main deck. The Cornishman ran after him, shouting curses.

Michael caught a stupefied seaman alongside the chin with his fist and dumped him into the whipstaff hutch. Then he turned and drove for the little man, his blade a twisting, stabbing blur. The point touched Black Mark on the shoulder. The little man screeched and clapped palm to wound, falling to his knees. Michael tossed his blade aside and, mounting to the after rail, leaped outward toward the smallboat.

His booted foot struck a seat and he pitched forward, slamming into the canvas-covered kegs, knocking them aside. A trifle dazed, he lay a moment, gasping for air. Above him a crewman aimed a pistol. Michael twisted aside as the ball struck splinters from the moldboard.

"*Hijos de perros!*" he screamed.

His hands sought the loose knot, tossing the holding rope into the water. With his rump pressed onto a thwart and the



oars in his big hands, he dug blades into water and pulled away from the *Devon Rose*. Twice more crewmen from the *Devon Rose* fired down at him. Once Michael rose to his feet to shake his fist at the receding ship and scream with Spanish fury.

His broad back and white linen shirt made a splendid target for the Spanish arquebusiers and crossbowmen. Momentarily he expected the dig of lead ball or stubby crossbow quarrel in that back.

As if the thought of danger from the *Felipe Rey* had just occurred to him, he turned and faced the oncoming *galea*. His hands cupped his mouth. "*Un amigo!* I'm a friend! Don't shoot! I am Don Esteban Nuñez de Valasco! Sometime captain of the plate ship *María Esquivel*. Don't shoot!"

Michael blessed the lazy days and idle curiosity that made him learn the Spanish tongue back on the island of Jamaica when the *Devon Rose* lay careened on its sands and the real Don Esteban Nuñez de Valasco had been his prisoner. To while away the tropic days they fenced with wooden tips fitted on their rapiers. At night Don Esteban sharpened his English while teaching Captain Goddard melodious Castilian.

He bent to the oars again.

The gilded red *galea* came on with a rush. One moment it was a hundred yards away, then it towered high above him and a rope was flying like a gigantic snake whipping and twisting through the air. His hands reached and missed. He flung himself forward, caught the rope end and held it, propping a foot against the forward moldboard. He leaned far back, bracing himself until agony rippled along his thighs and arms. Slowly the tender moved forward, caught and held by the forward progress of the *galea*. Now the tension eased so that Michael could bend and secure the rope around the stem post.

He sank forward, letting his head drop as if exhausted. For the length of ten deep breaths he remained this way, then leaned forward and began to pull himself in slowly on the rope, bringing the jolly boat close under the stern cabin and gallery, slipping the extra rope through a rudder brace and tying it. Under the stern cabin he was sheltered from any eyes that might observe him.



Turning, Michael whipped off the canvas cover.

A tinderbox lay beside the powder kegs. He knocked the cover off one of the powder kegs and, upending it, carried it from one end of the jolly boat to the other, scattering a thin black line along the keel boards. From the tinderbox he took flint and steel and scratched them together so that a spark fell into the charred cloth strip. With shredded bark he nursed the spark into a tiny flame, and the flame until it became a small fire. He touched the flame to the black powder line along the bottom of the boat.

One glance he took at the sizzling powder before he kicked free of his boots and, turning, put toes to moldboard and dove deep into the cold water. Like a stone he went down and down until the greenish waters became black and his lungs heaved desperately for air. Dear God 'above! Had the powder misfired? The kegs should have blown by now. To rise to the surface before—

The water trembled all around him and he felt lifted and shaken. As deep as he was, Michael heard the thunderous reverberation of the explosion. He turned upward and kicked savagely. When he came to the surface he found himself in a mass of splintered wood and giltwork. The entire stern of the *galea* was a sheet of red flame.

The Spanish ship was lowering a bumboat. Soldiers in breastplates and helmets were climbing down rope ladders carrying muskets. They were coming for him, probably to bring him back and tie him naked to the burning ship before they abandoned it to seek shelter on *El Gran Grifon*. He struck out purposefully but after a dozen strokes realized his sodden clothes acted as a sea anchor. Kicking hard, he freed himself of breeks and shirt and underclothes.

He noticed as he swam that the *Devon Rose* was veering to leeward, jibing and coming about. *El Gran Grifon* would be almost abeam of the *galea* by now. He risked a glance behind him. The galleon was luffing, lowering its main courses and sending boats overside to pick up survivors. Between himself and the *galea* was its smallboat, oars flashing wetly in air and burying themselves deep in water.

A musketeer moved to the smallboat's prow and steadied



himself, leaning the arquebus barrel on a gun rest, sighting and pressing trigger. A ball cut into the water a foot from Michael's head. To dive for shelter would slow him down. To swim straight ahead for the *Devon Rose* that was running before the wind meant he would expose head and shoulders to the Spanish marksman.

"I'll die one way or the other," he told himself, and began to swim.

The soldier fired again. Michael felt something touch the top of his head and sting. For an instant the world was a dizziness of empty gray sky and green water with a black ship flying upside down before his senses cleared. Through the sickness churning in his middle he heard the deep boom of a saker, the dry rumble of a culverin. *El Gran Grifon* was paying its respects to the approaching *Devon Rose*.

The foredeck guns of the English ship roared. There was a shrill whistle overhead. A moment later Michael heard the cannon ball drive into the prow of the jolly boat. Men screamed and cursed behind him.

Black Mark was half over the starboard rail, a weighted rope's end in a fist. When Michael came within hurling distance he whipped it about his head and flung it. Michael took three strokes, caught the wet rope before it sank and clung. He was dragged through the water until two men came overboard on rope ladders to clutch and lift him between them.

The Cornishman was grinning from ear to ear as the men lowered their captain to the deck planks. "One Spanisher going down by the stern, the other too overcrowded to do more than turn and beat for home. A good day's work, Captain Goddard."

Captain Goddard took deep gulps of salt air. He was cold and tired and naked. "We'll beat for home ourselves, Mark. Give the order."

"Aye, sir—after we get the pumps working. We took two balls in the storage lockers while you was rowing to the *Felipe Rey*. Big holes, large enough to drive a sow through. We're shipping water with every wave."

"Get a repair crew to rig a freeboard plug. Meanwhile crowd on what sail she'll take and veer north by nor'west. We'll make for Plymouth port rather than for London."



The *Devon Rose* limped through the cold gray day with pumps working and the sound of hammer and saw in her hold. The *Felipe Rey* was a mass of red fire low on the horizon before a sheet of canvas could be nailed to the *Devon Rose's* freeboards and reinforced with a makeshift patch of wood and leather. She tacked before what wind there was but she was a badly crippled ship.



## Chapter Two

---

THE COMMON ROOM of the White Ram in Plymouth Town was crowded with sailors. They sat at the long tables eating roast mutton and lamb, swilling down barley bread and cabbage with Kentish ale. Waitresses moved with swinging hips between the tables, laughing flirtatiously while they evaded the hands that came reaching beneath their woolen skirts. Candles and flat oil boats suspended on chains from the ceiling beams gave off a grayish smoke that made the far corners of the room hazy. Close by the dozen kegs of ale resting on a countertop men were singing a sea chanty, keeping accompaniment to the *merry-o* by pounding wooden tankards on the counter planks.

A redheaded barmaid leaned over Michael Goddard's shoulder, nudging him with a full breast. "More Canary, Captain?" she asked archly. "Or ale for the crew?"

"Ale for the crew, yes. For me, nothing. I have to see to my careened ship in Master Anthony's drydock."

The redhead put red lips to his ear. "If the Captain'd like, Agatha will be waiting in your quarters when you get back."

Michael grinned and hooked an arm at her middle, drawing her down across his thigh. She was a handsome wench with dark red hair flooding over white shoulders bared by a low-cut fustian bodice. Between the *échelle* lacings he caught a glimpse of firm white mounds.

"I have a girl in Exeter waiting my return," he told her. "Do you think she'd approve if you and I kept rendezvous abovestairs later?"

Her eyes were flirtatious as she said, "Gone from sight, gone



from mind. Who knows who she waits for now? The New World is a long way from Exeter."

"Three years away," he said slowly.

The girl hooted and kicked her slippered feet. "Three years? Can you remember her name? Will she remember yours?"

Her name was Shirley Tryon, and she was daughter to the merchant owner of a dozen drapers' shops from Exeter to Dover. Thaddeus Tryon was a rich man and ambitious. Twice Michael had been thrown bodily from the little walled garden where he visited with Shirley. She was a saucy one, his Shirley, but her father cared little for this infatuation with the youngest son of a herring fleet owner. Thaddeus Tryon dreamed of her marriage to a fellow merchant or perhaps even with an impoverished noble to whom Tryon wealth might prove an irresistible magnet.

He and Shirley had sworn faithfulness to one another, but an absence of three years can be an eternity to young blood and an ambitious father. Michael wondered as he stroked the barmaid what changes might have occurred in the fine town house near High Street and the Guildhall.

"Well, Captain?" asked the girl, eyes wide and bold. "Shall there be a bottle of Canary on the table and me between the coverlets waiting your return?"

His was a time of loose morality. Noblemen tore down churches to sell their lead roof plates. The Queen herself refused to appoint a bishop to the see of Oxford so that she might use its revenues. Bribes to royal favorites were the order of the day. Venery and worldliness were rampant. Few husbands could answer positively on the matter of their wives' virtue. Bastardy was a socially accepted status, and illegitimate children could inherit property. Every tavern had its service rooms and its waitresses only too willing to tumble in the sheets for a sixpence piece or—if the barmaid were pretty and the gentleman well-to-do—perhaps for a silver crown.

Michael clapped the redhead on a rounded buttock and lifted her to her feet. "Make that a bottle of Malaga and you'll earn yourself a gold sovereign."

Her eyes grew wide with surprise. Gold coins were not easily come by these days. She curtsied low, and the manner



in which she stared up at him told Michael he'd made no mistake. She ran to fetch his cloak and the plain leather baldric that held his sword.

Michael tossed a purse on the table. "See the men enjoy themselves," he told Black Mark. "I'll return within the hour."

The night was squally and rain-swept. A wind was raging off the Hoe that drove the rain in sheets along the empty, cobbled streets. Michael drew up the thick collar of his heavy woolen sea cloak and lowered his head as he left the recessed doorway of the White Ram. The wind caught him, pressing the woolen cloak tight against his cavalier boots, making walking difficult.

As he was crossing Catwater Street where it turned south toward the Hoe he heard a rumble of coach wheels and the clatter of horses' hooves. Almost with relief to be in out of the rain he drew aside into the shelter of a building overhang. Horses and a coach were no respecter of persons in these narrow alleys.

The sudden report of a pistol startled him. He stared down the street toward an arched stone passageway. By the light of the coach's candle lamps he saw three cloaked men running from the shadows toward the carriage. The coachman was swaying drunkenly on the high seat; as Michael watched, he slid over the footrest to land on the long swingletree. The four horses danced nervously.

The coach door was flung open. A woman cried out in angry dismay when one of the three men reached into the blackness of the coach and drew her out, handling her roughly. As the other two men reached for her the woman screamed.

Michael was halfway to the stone arch before he realized his sword blade was in his hand. His flat cap fell off but he did not mind the rain and wind beating into his face. Anger was a fire in his veins, driving him under the arch and into the two men holding the struggling woman.

His fist slammed the rapier guard into a face. There was a crunch of nose gristle under that thudding blow. His left hand caught her second attacker, yanked him forward and flung him sideways.

The footpad beside the open coach door was fumbling with



shot bag and pistol. Michael lashed out with the edge of his blade, catching the man across the knuckles, laying open the hand down to the bone. The ruffian screeched. Michael had acted so suddenly that their surprise was complete. Even the scamp who was uninjured goggled disbelievingly before he reached for his own sword.

Michael gave him no time to play a defensive game. He was across the archway cobbles and his sword edge was a wicked blur feinting past an awkward parry to thrust deep into a shoulder. As he yanked his blade free the man gave a little cry and stumbled into the night.

Michael would have gone after him but a low voice called, "Wait, please! On whatever you call sacred, stay beside me!"

He paused in the light of a candle lamp to look at the woman, seeing a rich satin cloak muffling her from head to slippered toes, hiding most of her face except for eyes and mouth. Even in the shadow of the coif her mouth looked red and moist. Though he could see little but the enshrouding pelisse, Michael had a feeling that the woman was extremely beautiful. Diamond rings glinted like white fire on the hand that held the cloak to her throat.

"They won't come back," he assured her. "I know their kind. They're like mongrel curs who attack in packs but flee yelping if you hurl a stone."

"There may be others," she whispered.

"On a night like this?" His hand invited her attention to the wind-swept streets.

She shook her head. "Weather doesn't stop their kind."

He was intrigued. "Are they more than footpads seeking to rob a lady of quality?"

Her long-lashed eyes widened. There was genuine surprise in her startled glance. "Are you so ignorant? Even here in Plymouth you'll surely have heard of the Spanish party?"

Michael scowled. "I'm new to England. I've been away three years." He bowed slightly. "I'm Captain Michael Goddard of the *Devon Rose*, careened now in—"

"Oh no!" she cried and shrank away.

Hurriedly she tore the diamond rings from her hand and held them out on a white palm. "Take these, please. Only—"



His bewilderment was so obvious that she leaned to peer more closely at him. Almost to herself she murmured, "It can't be . . . and yet Morton was so sure . . . so insistent. . . ." She appeared to withdraw behind the coif, clutching it tighter about her face, head tilted sideways.

Michael hesitated between laughter and anger. "You've mistaken me for someone else," he said. "I'm no scapegrace to steal from an unprotected woman."

In a curious voice she asked, "Aren't you the Captain Goddard who carries a rare treasure in his hold? One that can be valued upwards of three million guineas at the very least?"

"Why, yes—but how did that news come to Plymouth before me? Still, we've been overlong at sea. Perhaps a passing ship spread the word."

"It could be," she murmured. White teeth came out to nibble a protruding lower lip. Twice she seemed to speak before he heard, "Everyone is so positive that I must believe too, and yet—"

He growled impatiently, "Positive of what?"

"Those men who attacked me were Spanish party members."

He knew her eyes searched his face for reaction to her words. When he registered only annoyance, she sighed.

Movement behind them caused Michael to swing around. The coachman was stirring on the swingletree, striving to pull himself erect. Michael went to him, climbed the wheel to the footrest and lifted and placed him on the driver's seat.

"Ball went into my hip," the man gasped. "Pain made me faint. I—I think I'll be all right if I can get to a medico."

The cloaked woman stood by the off-front wheel, staring up. "Can you drive a coach?" she asked.

"I can, though I'm more familiar with the tiller of a ship. Where are you bound?"

"Shoreham House beyond the square."

He waited until she was inside the coach before he lifted the reins and chirped to the horses. The coach trundled out of the archway into the wind and rain. As he drove, Michael Goddard found himself puzzled and faintly annoyed. The woman acted as if he were a traitor to the Crown or an agent



of Philip II. The way she stripped those rings from her fingers you'd think she expected him to run a dagger into her! He growled in his throat, angry and somehow uneasy.

This was not the home-coming he expected. The more he reflected on her obvious terror and suspicion the more uneasy he became. Obviously his name was well known in certain corners of England. It was known, too, that he carried a great treasure in the hold of the *Devon Rose*. If the cloaked woman feared him, it must mean that his reputation—given him by whom and for what purpose?—was no better than that of a common highwayman! As the coach trundled over the cobbles Michael was strangely frightened. He felt like a chess pawn moved blindly forward against unknown odds, toward death or disaster. He felt stifled, as if surrounded by an enveloping blanket.

He reined the horses through an iron grille gateway and into an inner court where a linkboy and two men with torches came running. One of the men held a leather umbrella to shelter the woman from the downpour. For a moment Michael hesitated, then leaped off the driver's seat.

His hand on her wet sleeve turned her toward him. "Are you running so soon, madame? Without a word of gratitude? Without telling me where you heard such evil things of me?" Anger made his voice thick. "Am I no more than a common footpad in your eyes?"

Michael Goddard would always remember the words the hooded woman spoke next. The rain pelting down while the driver was being lifted from the seat and the howling of the wind about the brick chimneys of the great mansion were forgotten before the increased thudding of his heart. He lost himself in her brilliant eyes and as much of her lovely face as the hood revealed.

"I'm grateful to you, of course," she said breathlessly. "In my gratitude I'll play traitor to my Queen and warn you to leave Plymouth port as soon as possible. For it's my duty to tell Elizabeth that the man who holds the safety of her throne in his hands has arrived at last in England!"

She was gone into the wind and the rain while he stood motionless with stupefaction. He was aware of a door being



opened to a candlelit foyer into which she swept with rapid strides. Then the door closed and a linkboy drew the horses toward the stables. Captain Goddard stood alone in the darkness.

"Warn me to leave Plymouth? I hold the safety of Elizabeth's throne in my hands? The woman's mad!"

He stamped through the grille gateway onto the cobblestones of The Pool Square. Head low, he walked into the full force of the gale, feeling wetness seeping through cloak and doublet. He was cold and wet and angry, and inclined to think he walked in nightmare. He gave no heed to the stone street-well past which he lurched or the creaking of the wooden signs overhead. He was intent on finding the drydock and getting his business over and done with as soon as possible. After that he had a mission to perform at the Friary of St. Martin of Tours.

If he meant so much to Queen Elizabeth it might be wise to slip a trump card up his doublet sleeve lest his sovereign decide his life be better ended. He could not conceal the golden statues nor the ropes of pearls that weighted down the hold of his *Devon Rose*, but he *could* hide the jewels that reposed now in the four caskets under his cabin bedstead. Elizabeth of England would hesitate to order killed a man who could put two million guineas in jewels into her palms.

Michael chuckled. The best part of it was, he was transferring his wealth from one *Devon Rose* to another. It was a riddle that might well wrinkle a few brows in England before he revealed his secret!

## ii.

Michael came into the tavern bedroom dripping water. He shook loose his woolen cloak and threw it wet and sodden over the linenfold screen before the fireplace. Rain beat against the wide bay window in a steady tattoo. The wind was rising in intensity beyond those loaded panes with a strange, moaning intensity.

"Soaked to the buff," Michael said as he undid the buttons



of his doublet and pulled it free of his trunk hose. He found a towel beside the wooden washstand and ran it from wide shoulders to his hard middle.

A fingernail scratched the oak door. The redheaded barmaid stood in the hall with two wine bottles on a wooden tray. She giggled when she saw his deep chest and the golden hairs that ran from pectoral muscles to his navel.

"The Malaga, Captain."

He drew her into the room. "Lord, I'd forgotten about you. Come in, come in. I did promise you a gold sovereign, now didn't I?"

The barmaid was not shy. She kicked the door closed behind her and, putting down the tray, pressed herself against him. "You'll catch your death from the wet things you have on. Let Agatha help you out of them and into a warm, comfortable bed."

His hand reached past her shoulder for a tall bottle. His teeth closed on the cork, pulling it free. Tilting the bottle neck to his lips, he drank deep, holding the girl to him with his free arm. Even as he drank he felt her sly fingers un-knotting the drawstrings of his trunk hose.

"You'll have to sit so's I can take your boots off," she whispered, touching his throat with moist lips.

The wine was warming. The logs in the hearth gave off a cheery heat that made him forget the wetness and the cold. He let the girl push him to the bed, where he sat and lifted a leg. Turning, the barmaid gripped his booted foot between her knees, tugging at the leather with her hands. Michael lifted his other foot and set it against her backside, pushing.

She almost lost her balance stumbling forward, but the boot came off in her hands. She laughed at him, tossing the boot aside. "Now the other, Captain."

When he was naked he rolled between the coverlets of the big four-poster and sat with his back propped to a pillow against the headboard. As the barmaid crossed to the food hutch for the tray and bottles, he said, "I've been out of England a long time, Agatha."

She looked back over her shoulder. "I've heard there are few women in the New World." She lifted the tray and car-

ried it to the night table where a lighted candle made dark shadows of the tall bottles on the wall. "Only Indians. Are Indian women pretty?"

"Not the ones I saw." His hand caught her wrist and drew her to a sitting position on the covers. Agatha made no attempt to stop the fingers that began unlacing the *échelle* ribbons of her bodice. She smiled down at him invitingly, both hands braced on either side of his chest. He said dreamily, "Your skin is very white and very soft."

"Would the Captain care for his Malaga?"

"In a moment. Just now——"

When he released her she was breathing fitfully, eyes dark and hungry behind long lashes. "You *have* been away from England a long time," she murmured.

"So long I'd forgotten what delight a pretty girl can be. Also I find myself woefully ignorant about political matters. You must hear things, serving travelers in the common room. What is this Spanish party?"

"English friends of Philip II." She leaned forward, lowering herself. "Must we speak of them at a time like this?"

"Only for so long as it takes you to undress. Meanwhile, pass the wine. I'll drink and watch you while you tell me everything you know."

Agatha let her lips widen in a sultry smile. "You want me to tease you, Captain? Well, I'm not against stirring a man to madness. Especially such a man as you."

Handing him the opened bottle, she said, "The Spanish party was formed in England thirty years ago when Philip of Spain—now Philip II—married Mary Stuart. When Elizabeth had Mary beheaded she made the party a lot of friends. There's an element would like to see Spain and England united. Spain's the most powerful country in the world, you know."

She lifted her worsted skirt, revealing a pale yellow underpetticoat and a length of shapely white leg. Catching the direction of his glance, she laughed softly. It was very pleasurable to Agatha Simons to see desire come into a man's eyes when he looked at her. Her life was such a humdrum welter of cleaning and mopping, serving on table and cooking meats



and vegetables that she looked forward to these stolen moments with eager breathlessness.

As the worn velvet bodice came off and her breasts shook loosely against a white linen chemisette, he made a deep sound in his throat. He would have come out of bed except for her upraised hand. "You wanted to hear about the Spanish party, Captain? Then listen!"

There were Englishmen who favored elevating Philip II to the throne and a union with Spain against France and the Low Countries. They considered themselves as patriotic as any of Elizabeth's counselors. What they did was done with the welfare of England in mind. So potent had this group grown that when Mary Stuart lost her head at Fotheringhay, Queen Elizabeth went into mourning, imprisoning her secretary of state and forbidding others involved from attending her so as not to antagonize them further. Partly to placate this sizable segment of her populace, partly to prevent a rupture of her recent alliance with King James VI of Scotland and to reassure Henry III of France that this deed was done without her consent, Elizabeth granted a public burial with royal honors for the former Queen of Scots.

Elizabeth walked a tightrope of intrigue these days, Agatha admitted, moving in her thin shift to the bed table to fill a goblet with the heady Malaga. Not only was there Scotland and France and the Spanish party to placate and keep friendly—or if not friendly, at least not overtly hostile—but there was this new sect called Puritans springing up in all corners of the kingdom. Spanish party members and loyalists disagreed with each other only about religion and politics; the Puritans disagreed with everybody about everything. Some of these people had risen to high posts, too. There were Spanish party members and Puritans even in Parliament.

One could never tell, really, where one might show up. Even she might be a Philip-lover, Agatha giggled, standing before the candle to permit the shadow of her legs and hips to show. "I'm not, of course. You don't think I'd be joking like this if I were, do you?"

Michael laughed and reached out for her. "You've told me all I want to know, girl. Now come here before——"

The thin shift tore in his fingers as Agatha tried to flee. His arms caught and lifted her, dropped her still laughing onto the quilted coverlets. He threw the shreds of the undergarments aside as he sought her lips. She was warm and fragrant and inclined to amorousness, but even as he sank onto her body Michael Goddard found himself remembering the woman in the hooded cloak whose dark eyes had shone so feverishly bright as she stared at him.



## Chapter Three

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THE *Devon Rose* lay anchored in the Thames opposite The Pool below London Bridge. Restless and uneasy, Captain Goddard paced her poop resplendent in maroon velvet doublet and matching trunk hose. His high boots were of red cordovan leather. A short mandilion coat hung from a shoulder, swinging gently to his short, vigorous strides. He was anxious to be done with his official reports to the harbor master so that he could hire a coach to take him south and west to Exeter, where he hoped to find Mistress Shirley Tryon anxiously awaiting his arrival.

As he dreamed by the rail his attention was caught by three men walking purposefully across the crowded dock toward his gangplank. Remembering the warnings of the woman in the black cloak, he felt a cold chill move down his back. These men wore the traditional dark blue uniform of the Dock Watch. Even as far away as the Windward Islands he'd heard tales of these customs officials of the Queen.

More recently, in the bedchamber of the White Ram in Plymouth, Agatha Simons had informed him that Queen Elizabeth was tortured by fears that her wandering sea captains might be pocketing unlawful treasures. As Queen she took the royal share, despite the fact that these ventures were financed by private monies. Her ministers had devised the Dock Watch to make certain it came to her. Their powers on the Thames waters were almost unlimited. Rumor said the Dock Watch was answerable only to Sir Francis Walsingham, who was responsible only to Elizabeth.

His fist beat the rail capping, revealing the worry that made him frown so blackly. He was not hiding anything from his Queen. He prided himself on his loyalty. It was not Bess he

feared but the men who served her. He knew now that all England was divided into two camps over foreign policy with regard to Spain. Some of the men who comprised the Dock Watch might not be the loyal servitors of Sir Francis Walsingham they claimed to be. Agatha Simons had said as much, telling him of sea captains made prisoner by the Watch and never seen again. Now the Dock Watch was here to assess his cargo and report back to Walsingham.

And to arrest him, as others had been arrested?

Michael decided to meet them in his cabin. He moved down the companionway to the quarter-deck. The captain's cabin was set in under the poop deck, its many-windowed stern looking aft toward London Bridge and the spires of St. Mary Overy. It was a large room whose walls were paneled in pine and enlivened here and there by excellent copies of Holbein miniatures. Michael always felt slightly uncomfortable in this cabin. It resembled a palace room with its silver candelabra and japanned desk, carved scrollwork on its ceiling beams and the massive four-poster bed with ruffled valances and canopy. Even the *silla*, a chair inlaid with mother-of-pearl, was too gaudy for his tastes. A knock on the companionway door swung him around.

Peter Rawles poked his head through the opening. Peter had run away from home to ship as cabin boy on the old *Devon Rose*. During the three years they had been away he'd grown four inches and a scrawny beard. His eyes were very round as they peered through the open doorway.

"Three Queen's officers to see 'ee, Captain. Haughty men they be, wi' their noses atilt like a bowsprit in a storm. I don't like 'em."

Captain Goddard grinned. "Send them in anyhow, Peter. We shouldn't judge birds by their feathers."

When the three officials stood in his cabin, Michael knew what young Peter meant. These men were filled with a false importance. Their shifty eyes peered this way and that, assaying the luxurious furnishings of the cabin, and regarding young Captain Goddard with an owlish gravity. They sniffed their disdain for the foreign cut of his clothes.

"You've come about the accounting?" Michael asked.

The tallest of the three smiled coldly. "In a sense, you



could say that. You'll have kept a log? A record of the treasure you've amassed?"

Michael thought it strange there were no congratulatory words, no invitation to ride to Whitehall or possibly to Windsor Castle and be complimented by Queen Bess herself. This was the usual procedure when one of her seadogs heaved anchor overside in the Thames. He'd heard old seamen talk about it often enough in those days when he was a Devonshire fisherman helping his older brother with the herring hauls.

The heavy lacquer desk was a step away. Michael took that step, telling himself, It isn't so much royal favor I'm after as it is a chance to prove to Her Majesty I'm a loyal subject. England had need of loyal men these days.

He brought out three wide, flat ledger books and set them on top of the desk. "You'll find everything accounted for in here. There's gold bars in the hold and chests of doubloons. If you——"

The words choked in his throat. One of the three men held a long-barreled horse pistol in a hand. It was aimed exactly for his face from less than three feet away. The man who held it was smiling grimly.

"Thank you, Captain. Now if you'll hold out your wrists . . ." A second man held iron gyves in his hands. They were heavy to judge from the bunched muscles of his shoulders.

Michael drew back, his right hand going involuntarily to the braided hilt of his rapier. The pistol steadied.

"Oblige us, Captain. I'll not tolerate refusal. You're our prisoner. I prefer a live one to a dead one, but that's up to you."

He held his thick wrists out, numbly watched the iron hoops clamp around them. Twice he shook his head as if to clear it of the sheer astonishment that gripped him. "But why?" he asked at last. "Since when has it become the custom to arrest Elizabeth's captains on their return from the New World? Especially when the voyage has been a successful one?"

The tallest man said, "You're being arrested because you're suspected of being a Spanish party member, Captain. You've

been away from England for three years. Let me assure you an English Spaniard is something more than a traitor to Queen and country. It's been learned they plot to hand England over to Spain and Philip."

The memory came to him of a rain-swept night in Plymouth, of a beautiful face hidden in a cowl and words that still flamed in his mind. *For it's my duty to tell Elizabeth that the man who holds the safety of her throne in his hands has arrived at last in England!* To add to that madness was this moment of insanity in which he stood accused of treachery.

The speech frozen on his tongue came to life with a roar. "God's love! This is ridiculous. I'm no more a member of the Spanish party than you are yourself. How could I be, having been gone so long from England?"

"There are Spaniards in the New World. Judging by your appearance, it seems you've learned to ape their popinjay tastes in clothing."

He was something of a popinjay himself, this tall Dock Watch nobleman, with his black, glossy hair all curled and scented. He wore an ornate mandilion, a hip-length jacket with a standing collar and heavy with cloth-of-gold and brocade work, its sleeves dangling loosely. His baggy Venetians were of velvet and gathered at the knees by a pickadil border. Tight white stockings and white cordwain shoes added to his foppish look.

Michael growled, "My English garments went down with my old *Devon Rose* in the Tortuga Straits. Would you have had me go down with them rather than capture this fine galleon and use its fittings as my own?"

The nobleman grimaced above his lace falling band. "You make much protest, Captain, but that doesn't alter the fact that you've had to do with these Spaniards."

"Only to meet them with sword and pistol on the Main. Only to rob from them to enrich Bess and England!"

The tall man was seated at the japanned desk, staring down at an open ledger. He made an impatient motion with an arm, saying, "They are Spaniards, sirrah. They can corrupt even the most loyal of her subjects."

Michael felt derisive, bitter laughter move in him. "Before



God, do you tell me the men I robbed seduced me from my loyalty to Elizabeth? I can scarcely credit such stupidity!"

The tall man gestured again, and now Michael saw the other two advance to clasp the heavy gyve chains. "Take him away. He'll believe we mean what we say after he's lived in solitary for a while."

Until this moment, with the manacles biting into his wrists as his captors tugged on them, Michael was filled only with compulsive amazement. Now anger whipped his blood so that he whirled, swinging one of the men off his feet to land heavily at the foot of the Spanish *cassone*.

"Send word to Sir Thaddeus Tryon and to his daughter Shirley!" he roared. "They'll vouch for my loyalty!"

The tall man seated at his desk rested elbows on either side of the ledger. Cupping his chin on the backs of folded hands, he smiled faintly. "Captain Goddard, how do you think we learned of your treachery? Through your own letters—turned over to us by Mistress Tryon—the very woman you call on to speak in your favor." In a mild voice he went on, "Give over these protests. They begin to tire me."

The disbelief in Michael Goddard gave way to dismay as the man who had fallen against the carved floor chest rose to his feet and, grasping the gyve chains, tugged viciously at them. He went to his knees, biting his lips against the pain of cut wrists. Dazedly he shook himself. A monstrous mistake, he thought wildly. They're making a monstrous mistake! There was no man in or out of England more loyal to its Queen than himself. He had proved it again and again on the Spanish Main. The treasure he'd brought back on the *Devon Rose* ought to be assurance for that!

He tried to say something of this as his captors dragged him out the cabin door. A last backward glance showed that the tall man was not listening. He was wrapped avidly in a reading of the ship's log and of the account books that spoke so accurately of the gold and jewels which Captain Michael Goddard had taken from the Spanish galleons of Philip II.

His crew watched silently as the dock watchmen dragged him out of the companionway onto the main deck. Michael saw that their hands held daggers and iron belaying pins.

One man shouted, "If ee wants us, Cap'n—say the word and we'll keelhaul both them parties!"

The round muzzle of a horse pistol pressed into the back of his neck. A voice whispered furiously, "Say that word and a pistol ball breaks your spine, Captain!"

Michael did not know whether it was hope that the mistake being made would be explained shortly or sheer anger which made him shake his head.

"No, lads. No need to let them clap you in gaol because of me. A mistake's been made. It'll be explained, I'm sure."

A tug on the gyve chains and Captain Goddard was slinging a leg overside, booted foot fumbling for the rope ladder. They let go of the manacles so he could descend into the waiting smallboat. The horse pistol was still a threat, though, peering down at him with a hard face just behind its kidney butt. Michael felt a touch of despair. This was madness! Mistress Shirley Tryon could never have turned over any letters of his, for he had written no letters! Even if he'd written them how could he have despatched them from the New World?

Hands reached up to guide him to a seat. The boat gave a little lurch as his two captors dropped into it from the rope ladder. One man came and sat beside him, the horse pistol still in his hand.

The oars dipped and rose, shedding water. The dying sun was reflected redly on their wet blades. The boat slid through the waters of the Thames. In the distance, the bells of St. Catherine Cree clanged with a faintly mournful roll. A cold wind off Lambeth Marsh made Michael shiver in his maroon doublet. His gay clothes seemed suddenly ridiculous and faintly frightening. A man might dress like this, with a faint touch of bravado, on his way to the executioner's block.

To his surprise his captors did not take him to Tun Prison. Instead the awkward coach that rattled over the cobbles of Fish Street and Corn Hill creaked to a halt before a large stone building that once had been the charter house of a church. As he stepped from the wagon, Michael ran his gaze back and forth over its steeply slanted roof and high windows.

"You'll be warm and cozy inside them walls," chuckled the man with the pistol. "Safe, too. Nothing can get in to hurt you. Likewise, you can't get out to hurt yourself."



"A private home? I thought we'd go to Tun. Or perhaps to Newgate."

"Our Queen's a sly one. She likes to be able to put her finger on a man without the whole country knowing what she's about. Most especially a man wi' as much gold as you brought back from this place they call America."

A hand pushed him between tall iron fence posts into a garden. A door opened ahead of him and a man with a lantern—it was dusk and the first stars were in the sky—came out of the doorway along the gravel walk.

"Be it him, Jamey?" he asked hoarsely.

"Who else would we be bringing in such style with big bracelets on his wrists? Is his room ready?"

"Ar. Filled with fresh straw for his bed and a clean pot for a privy."

"You hear that, Captain? You're an important man to them. They think right well of you," said the smaller of his captors.

"They?" Michael asked quickly. "Who are 'they'?"

"Alf, you talk too much," growled the man named Jamey, and cuffed Michael on the jaw with the back of a meaty hand. He felt his head swim a moment. Jamey was a big man, beefy, and he hit hard. After a moment, strength came back into his legs so that he could move along the gravel walk without staggering.

Alf eyed him almost affectionately. "You'm a good man, Captain. Jamey don't realize his own strength, sometimes. You stood up to his buffet. Not many can do that."

Jamey growled a second time and the smaller Alf subsided.

The garden door opened onto a narrow hall faintly lighted with a hanging pan lamp. Ahead of Alf and Jamey, Michael went along the hall until they reached a small door. This opened onto a flight of steps leading into a dank, odorous cellar. The man with the lantern joined them, carrying a large key ring in his hand.

The cellar was divided into barred chambers. The doors to each stood ajar. From somewhere in the darkness there was the steady drip of water. The key fitted into a rusty lock and turned. The man with the lantern pushed open the door.

"The bridal chamber," he grinned, showing blackened teeth.

Alf said, "If you'm wants a street trull, Captain, some doxy out of a Newgate stall, I'll——"

The side of a hamlike hand caught the little man under an ear, pitching him halfway across the cellar. Jamey roared, "The captain stays solitary like his lordship said! No trulls! No visitors! None at all!"

Alf got to his feet, rubbing an ear and shrugging. "It was a long sea journey, Jamey. Man's entitled to a little fun after three years away from——"

"Not down here he ain't," grumbled Jamey, and closed the barred door. For a moment his face seemed to hang in mid-air above the pale beams of the lanthorn. Michael told himself he would never forget those heavily drooping eyes, the sparsely bearded jowls, the scarred forehead. Two teeth were broken in the man's mouth, and showed jagged edges. He was an animal, a brute; but he was strong as an ox and, in his own way, filled with a kind of cunning.

Alf might be a weak reed on which to hang any hope of rescue, but this burly jailer offered none at all. The man with the lanthorn moved and the brutish face disappeared into blackness. There were the sounds made by three pair of feet receding slowly and then only silence.

No, it was not quite silent.

He could hear the slow, steady drip of water.

*ii.*

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth I of England was very angry. A tiny, slippered foot tapped impatiently on the polished flooring of the palace antechamber in which she was granting an audience to Her Grace, the Duchess of Sunderland. From time to time, even as she sought words to express her displeasure, she waved her hands in furious little gestures.

"Arrant treachery I call it. You have the knave in your hands and let him slip from you!"

The Duchess of Sunderland could be as haughty as her Queen. "The man's no more a traitor than I am myself! I still think the one you have to watch most closely is Edmund Morton, Lord Cavendish."



"Sometimes I wonder about your own loyalty, Meg, my dear. Except for Cavendish, this Captain Michael Goddard might have given us the slip. Cavendish is on to him, however. He's arrested him and keeps him his prisoner, incommunicado! Did I neglect to tell you the man's hidden the bulk of his treasure so cleverly nobody can find it?"

"Thank God for that," whispered Her Grace.

Elizabeth Regina tapped her fan across a palm. "You grow impertinent, Meg. I know all you've done for me, posing as a barmaid or tavern wench from time to time so's to learn choice tidbits of gossip—but damn my eyes! In this matter of Michael Goddard I find you curiously stubborn! The man's a Spanish agent and there's an end to it!"

Margaret Sutton felt her cheeks go red. "He's nothing of the kind. If he were Philip's man, would he have robbed Philip's plate fleets and treasure ships for the past three years on the Main? Would he return with that treasure to England?"

The Queen threw her hands high. "Cavendish explains that, as I've told you a dozen times! This is a deep-laid plot of Philip's to buy arms and men and so foment a rebellion to coincide with a Spanish naval attack and invasion of our country. Captain Goddard did not loot the treasure he brings home. It was given him by the Spanish in Cartágena and Porto Bello to be smuggled into England and here turned over to the Spanish party for its use."

"Lies!" cried Lady Margaret vehemently.

Elizabeth laughed harshly. "If I didn't know you for a cold, heartless jade I'd say this Michael Goddard made you fall in love with him, back there in Plymouth. How else explain this sudden interest in a man your Queen knows to be a traitor?"

"It's the simple justice of the case that appeals to me. I ask myself: what if this sea captain is a loyal, honest Englishman? Suppose Cavendish forged those letters he displayed in court? Not only does my lord Cavendish have a free hand to use the treasure that should rightfully be yours, but he also has the power to do away with Michael Goddard so you can never learn the truth."

The Queen took five steps away from the brocaded wall tapestry hanging behind a long oak table. Her white teeth nibbled on a thin lower lip. At last she shook her head. "It

cannot be. I've put too much trust in Edmund Morton to turn against him now."

"At least let me learn what I can! Give me permission to keep watch on your precious Morton, to learn what he does with this Michael Goddard. I promise not to intrude myself or make him suspect I don't trust him!"

"What's your plan?"

"To keep an eye on my lord Cavendish and learn where he's keeping Captain Goddard. To free the captain, if I can."

"Once he's free—then what?"

"I'll test his loyalty. You've said yourself that if we had one good fighting man we could trust, we might break the Spanish party before it foment rebellion."

Elizabeth stared coldly at Her Grace of Sunderland. "I ought to forbid such nonsense. Still—what's this sea captain like?"

"His hair's the color of my own Devonshire flax, a pale yellow. His eyes are blue. He stands a good head taller than myself. You should see him use a blade! He fights with a kind of flame inside him and a tiny smile on his lips. Three men confronted me. He was so sudden, one lay on the cobbles with a broken nose, another had a gash in his hand, and he was crossing steel with a third—all before I could draw a breath."

"These men he attacked were Spanish party members?"

"Somehow they must have learned I was to meet Sir Walter, to confer with him about our defenses along the southern coast. One even shouted, 'For Philip and Spanish England,' as he opened the coach door."

"It's a point in your hero's favor. Very well, I give you consent to do what you can in this matter, Meg. God knows I'd be happy to have a man like that on my side."



## Chapter Four

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DRIPPING WATER splatted into a puddle somewhere in the darkness of the cellar. It had no beginning and no end to the man who crouched in a corner of the tiny cubicle that was his prison. The dripping water had always existed, even when they'd brought him here off his ship: how long ago? A week? A month? A man lost touch with time alone in the darkness with no shaft of sunlight or glitter of stars at night to play clock for his loneliness.

Just eternal blackness and dripping water.

Of course he managed to make scratches on the stone wall with his belt buckle, counting two feedings as a day. It was so haphazard a method, however, that he was tempted to abandon it as worse than no reckoning at all. The scratches told him he'd been here six weeks when he ran fingertips over them.

He lay now on his back, staring upward into the darkness. *I brought a treasure back to England in the hold of my ship. For this I am treated like a common criminal, thrown into a jail cell and forgotten by the world, left to die and rot!* Bitterness etched his mouth in a savage curve.

Michael swung up on an elbow, listening. Had that been a footstep out there? No, no. He was mistaken. His gaoler had been here less than an hour ago with his meal of bread and roast meat. It was not time for him to come again. The constant drip, drip was the only sound he heard.

He clapped hands to his ears. When they first brought him here he used to count those gurgling falls, but that had been long ago. Now he let the water go on endlessly without trying to see how long he could count before losing interest.

Metal clanged at the cell bars. Michael sat upright, hugging

himself. "Who's there?" he called. "Who is it?" His voice was hoarse and sounded like the croaking of a bullfrog.

"Anxious are you, my fine bucko?"

It was not the gaoler. He knew his voice better than he knew his own. Michael Goddard rose to his feet. His legs quivered so that he could scarcely stand. He whispered, "I'm going mad. I smell perfume!"

He sniffed like an animal, bent over in the darkness. A key grated in the lock. The barred door was opening. Light came down the corridor where a lanthorn swung and made long shadows behind three walking figures. He could see the man at the cell door now and recognized him. It was Jamey.

The others were beyond the bars, staring in. He felt like an animal on display in the bear pits on the west side of the Thames. The tall man in the middle had a pomander ball that he dangled back and forth as he came through the open door. It was that perfume he had been smelling. Michael Goddard moved back two steps, eyes darting this way and that, seeing the grinning Jamey, the frowning Alf. He was starved and filthy, little better than an animal, but he could not help the sudden surge of pride that pounded through his veins.

He croaked, "You've come to release me, eh? Come to set me free, having discovered your mistake!" Anger flooded in to join the pride. "God's love! Is the Queen served by incompetents to commit such an error?"

The pomander ball swung to and fro, lazily. His Lordship laughed harshly. His eyes were black and very bright. "No error has been committed, Captain Goddard. Her Majesty has been presented with your letters to Mistress Tryon and with your account books." Lord Cavendish sighed. "Unfortunately, there's a discrepancy between the amount reported in the ledger books and the amount on board the *Devon Rose*."

"Is there now?" asked Michael softly.

"A vast fortune in jewels," smiled His Lordship gently, never taking his feverishly bright eyes from the ragged man before him. "More than half the sum of the entire treasure. Diamonds. Rubies. Emeralds. Some uncut, others still in their gold settings."

"And they've disappeared," Michael stated softly.

"Into thin air. We've searched the *Devon Rose* from prow



to stern. We've removed wainscoting in your cabin. We've ripped up deck planks. Our search has included the masts, the sails, the keel itself. I am convinced the jewels are not aboard that ship."

"Those jewels are on the *Devon Rose*," said Michael hoarsely. He lifted his hands and showed them big and strong, with thick wrists and powerful forearms. They were the hands of a man who has worked often with them, in all kinds of weather. "With these fingers, I put those jewels on the *Devon Rose*. My word on it, as a gentleman."

His Lordship smiled tightly. "The jewels are not on the ship, Captain." To cover his thoughts, he sniffed at his pouncet ball. This ragged man had the ring of truth in his words. Sir Edmund Morton, Lord Cavendish, prided himself on his knowledge of men. An inner voice told him Michael Goddard was telling the truth. Cold reason assured him he was not.

The nobleman appeared to hesitate. Then he said, "If the jewels are on the *Devon Rose* where on the ship will I find them?"

"Do you really expect me to tell you that, Your Lordship? You have the resources of all England at your fingertips. Continue to look."

Lord Cavendish shrugged abruptly. "You leave me no other choice, Captain. I'm no Inquisitioner to squeal in delight at a man's sufferings under torture. Yet you force me to adopt certain measures—"

A cold chill ran down Michael's back. Torture! God above! The hot iron, the thumb jammed into the screw and turned, slowly and agonizingly, the foot crushed into bonelessness by the boot. Or that Spanish bit, the *bastinado*, with a whip against the bare feet. He could not control the muscular spasm that shook his big body.

Sir Edmund Morton laughed. "I see you react as any sane man might. You've no desire to scream your throat raw in agony, eh? Speak out, Captain. Where are the jewels?"

"On board the *Devon Rose*!"

"You still insist?"

"If it's truth you want, I do!"

His lordship gestured and more men came into the little cell to reinforce Jamey and Alf. Hard men they were, with low

foreheads and bull necks, thick arms and shoulders making them seem squat. Michael counted four as Jamey dove through the air at him.

Michael pivoted and struck with his fist, catching the man flush on the mouth. Skin burst and teeth broke under that stunning impact. Jamey went down as if poleaxed. In turning to strike, however, Michael had exposed his side to Alf. The little man went for his knees, hitting into them hunched over. Michael slammed against the wall.

As his shoulder blades touched that cold stone, the four men were on him. One looped a fist through the air to his face. Another rammed knuckles into his belly, below his belt. A third drove in with lifting knee. Michael screamed and doubled up, fighting the nausea that thickened his throat. His legs gave way and he went down on his face in the straw.

A boot caught him alongside the temple, driving his head to one side. A hobnailed shoe rammed into his chest. Through a red fog he could hear his lordship murmur, "Easy now, my buckos. No need to murder him. I want him to talk, remember."

Hands lifted and held him where his legs would not. Michael was still conscious; the thin thread of reason that remained made him pretend a confidence he did not feel.

"The jewels, Captain? Where are they?"

"The *Dev-Devon Rose*. On the s-ship."

A hand caught him across the face. "The truth, Captain!"

"Truth. On the ship. Jewels."

His lordship stood back and surveyed him. He saw a tall man with thick yellow hair uncombed and unkempt above a gaunt face. The man hung weakly in the hands of those who held him, but his shoulders were broad and his legs long and wiry. There was a starved look about him that reminded Sir Edmund Morton of a fenland wolf he'd hunted years ago in Lincoln. Even with his face all red with blood and the bruises purpling ripely on face and chest he looked oddly dangerous.

His lordship shook his head, glancing involuntarily at the ceiling. He muttered, "If this were my country house—" and halted. His hand moved wearily, and the men holding Michael Goddard took away their hands and let him fall to the straw where he lay huddled over, moaning.

Jamey said eagerly, "Beant you'm going to use persuasion on him, Yer Lordship? A cat-o'-nine-tails now . . ."

"I'd like nothing better, Jamey. Yet we're in the heart of London Town. What would the Queen say if reports came to her that we used torture without her knowledge, eh? Especially where gossips could come on it, and make a to-do over it in court. Our Gloriana wouldn't like that, now would she?"

Jamey grinned wickedly. "Ar, sir. I understand."

Lord Cavendish came to stand over the prostrate Michael. The toe of his fashionable dress boot nudged the prone man. "I'm going to make one last try aboard the *Devon Rose*, fellow. If you can still pray, pray that I find those jewels. If I do, you'll die a swift death."

His eyes went around the circle of grinning men. "We can't leave the good captain alive to speak out about our interest in his treasure, now can we, good sirs? No, no. Not in any event. The Queen believes most of what I tell her, but we don't want to take any chances on her investigating our activities."

The men laughed. Lord Cavendish smiled slowly. He sighed, "If you prove obstinate, Captain, I'll find a way to make you take a long time dying. Sometime before you do you'll blurt out the real hiding place of those jewels."

The nobleman looked around the little cell and made a face. "Not in here, though. Too many people live hereabouts. Their dainty stomachs might be turned by your screams and they'd go hotfooting it to Her Majesty in complaint. I'll find a better place, a place where I can have a freer hand. . . ."

The voice died out. The barred door swung shut. The big iron key turned and tumblers clanged into place. The man in the cell lay doubled up on the straw, pain making his body move convulsively. After a while he rolled over on his back and stared up at the black ceiling.



## Chapter Five

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SIR EDMUND MORTON turned from the window of the upper room in Cavendish House that overlooked the Thames River glistening in the sunlight on this May morning. Above the cloth-of-silver doublet and trunk hose he affected, he wore a dark scowl. The cartwheel ruff about his throat made the flush on his cheeks blackly forbidding.

"I tell you, Everard, the man spoke the truth!"

Sir Lionel Everard spread his hands. "You're in command, Cavendish. 'Twas your fertile wit thought up the scheme in the first place. Whatever you say, we'll do. It's just that we've been over the *Devon Rose* so many times, so uselessly——"

A woman stirred in the shadows of an oak wardrobe, causing a faint rustle of taffeta. She said, "Perhaps I should withdraw, Edmund. You and Sir James will want to discuss matters that don't concern me."

Lord Cavendish was beside her in a moment, a hand under her chin, tilting back her head so that he might smile lazy-lipped down into her dark eyes. "Mistress Shirley, I vow you talk arrant nonsense. You know how very much I want you near me at all times." His hand touched her arm and caressed the flesh that he could feel smooth and soft beneath the trunk sleeve. There was an almost doglike quality of devotion in the gaze she turned on him. He sensed it and smiled. The woman flushed very slightly and looked away.

Everard cleared his throat.

Morton swung back to him with a chuckle. "I think Mistress Shirley Tryon can help us more than you or she realizes, Lionel. Come now. Let's review the facts before you call me madman.

"I am Court Captain of the Dock Watch. You, Everard,

have enough of the Queen's ear to give us certain unusual powers. One of them's the right to inspect all incoming cargo, eh? Even that of our faithful seadogs, to make certain Queen Bess isn't cheated. Now then, none's to know we take a portion of those goods for our own use, eh?"

Everard stirred. "Not strictly our own. Philip of Spain has——"

"I know, I know!" Morton made a gesture with his hand. "Philip has been more than generous with his Spanish gold. He keeps us living like lord peers of the realm. In return, we use our wits to insure the fact that the Castilian lion will devour the Tudor rose in the war that's coming between them.

"Now, then: we render most of our help by amassing monies for Philip. To date, we've been more than successful. Even the Spanish ambassador will admit that. Those monies await a command to throw them, like soldiers, into the fighting. Gold will bribe a man to dispose of Walsingham, of Drake, of Raleigh. One of us will have to do the job on the Queen, of course. Can't trust anyone else."

Everard walked to the window. He was a short man with a spade beard and black, piercing eyes. His legs in taut red hose were slightly bowed. They gave him the appearance of a man who lived most of his days in a saddle. His hands, clasped behind his back, worked together nervously.

He said, "To get back to Goddard. That young captain is proving unusually difficult. He refuses to tell us anything."

"He can be made to talk," Morton assured him lightly.

Everard turned from his contemplation of a pinnacle loaded with picnickers moving from Queen Hithe toward Paris Garden. "You have him celled in Montrose House, Edmund. It wouldn't do for the good residents of London Town to hear screams of agony some night. If I'm not mistaken you'll be forced to use hot iron and the boot on Captain Goddard. He won't talk otherwise."

The woman made a faint sound in the high-backed chair where she sat below a Flemish tapestry. Sir Edmund said to her, "We play for high stakes, Shirley. It's no time to be squeamish."

"But Michael and I——"

He was beside her again, a hand on the nape of her neck be-

low the brown Crèvecoeur curls, lightly stroking as he might a skittish horse. His position permitted him a glimpse of the crease between the smooth white breasts which were trembling so fitfully. Lord Cavendish sighed.

"Your father's in this with us, Mistress Shirley. Whatever you do to help, you do for him, if not for me." His slumbrous eyes watched her cheeks grow bright. Shirley Tryon was a pretty little thing. She'd come to him completely untutored in the amorous graces; he found his role of teacher a very pleasant one.

To the man at the window he said, "I realize our difficulties, Lionel. While we have the Queen's confidence for the nonce, it's a chancy thing at best. We must move cautiously, giving her no opportunity to suspect our affiliation with the Spanish party. Any hue and cry brought on by the screams of a tortured man—tortured, mind you, without the Queen's consent and behind her back—will make her instantly suspicious. She'd go to any lengths to find out why she wasn't informed of the torture—"

"Why not get her consent to it, then?" asked Shirley Tryon.

Lord Cavendish smiled. "And risk having one of her loyal ministers on hand to learn where the treasure is hidden? So that her accountants could make a record of the jewels? Shirley, Shirley! These jewels are not to go to the Queen but to Philip! We'll tell her none were to be found, of course, so that we may keep them all. I know. We take dangerous risks. We must be cautious. Overly cautious!"

Sir Lionel Everard frowned. "We've no guarantee that he'll talk even under torture."

Sir Edmund Morton laughed softly. "And that's why Mistress Shirley is here, Lionel. He may tell her things he won't tell us."

Sir Lionel asked, "How do you propose to bring about this miracle?"

"I'll let Mistress Tryon rescue him. To abduct him on some dark night away from Montrose House. After all, my Shirley was his intended before she met me. In gratitude for his being set free, and believing Shirley to be still in love with him and loyal to the Queen, I'm hoping he'll babble all he knows. You see, I try to think of every contingency."



Everard looked from the man to the woman and back to the man. He pursed his lips. "It might work, yes. Still, if Goddard believes Mistress Tryon turned over imaginary letters to the authorities, won't he be suspicious of her?"

"Shirley and I will work out those details. After you've gone, Lionel."

"Hmpf. As delicate a hint as I've heard in many a day. Well, I'll be on my way. My mind's a little more at ease, thanks to your wits. I'll rest better nights once we secure those jewels. If Goddard's any judge of baubles they double the value of the gold and silver."

When Sir Lionel Everard was out of sight along the corridor, Lord Cavendish brought out his enameled snuffbox and thoughtfully opened it. He showed himself an accomplished devotee of this latest fashion from the New World by inserting a pinch of the brown tobacco powder into each nostril. He waited until he heard the front door close before turning to the woman.

"Shirley, I must impress upon you how serious this matter is. We've already discussed the plan to attempt a false rescue of Captain Goddard. He must believe you really are rescuing him, do you understand? He must never once suspect it's only a trick to learn his secret."

"I understand, Edmund."

"Do you, I wonder? Will you be frightened, terrified of discovery? Will you be loving at sight of him? Pale and trembling with sympathy at the horror of his imprisonment? All this may sound like play-acting to your pretty ears but it's vital to success. He must believe in this rescue with all his heart. Otherwise he'll never confide the hiding place of those jewels to you."

Her lips smiled as she rose with a rustle of blue taffeta. Her brown hair was artfully curled, framed by the wire rebato that rose upward out of the fan-shaped ruff. The bodice which ran down into the pointed stomacher was cut square and low at the neck. Trunk sleeves and a farthingale skirt made her seem a court lady.

"Edmund, you worry too much."

"If I do, it's only because I like staying alive."

She put her arms about his neck and clung to him. "You're

much too smart ever to be caught, darling. Like your scheme to get Michael to confide his secret in me. It's awfully clever of you."

He looked for sarcasm, but found only admiration. He allowed his manner to melt a little, drawing her against him, kissing her meaningfully. Her lips were soft and moist. Sir Edmund found himself responding to her sensual appeal with his usual fervor.

"Our plan must not fail, dearest heart," he murmured, turning her so that his fingers might find the clasps of the French gown. "You cannot give Michael Goddard any reason to suspect this is a trick."

His hands pushed the collar of the gown off her shoulders. She murmured, "He may well seek to take the liberties you take with me now."

"I won't be jealous of a dead man. And that's what Captain Goddard will be, within a week. I doubt he'll hold out his information longer than that, one way or another."

Her breathing became faster the lower the gown slipped.

## ii.

The voice took a long time to penetrate the troubled dreams of the man on the piled straw bed. Twice he groaned and stirred before his eyes opened on the darkness. Water was still dripping far off down the hall. The man rolled over and buried his face in his arms.

"Hsst! Cap'n!"

Michael Goddard lifted his face from the rags that covered his arms. "Who is it? Who's there?"

"It's me, Cap'n. Little Alf!"

For some unaccountable reason—Michael had long ago abandoned hope—he started up to crouch on his knees in the straw. Once again he smelled perfume and shrank back into the darkness.

"His lordship? Is he with—"

"No, no, Cap'n. I'm all alone. I'm a messenger, you might say. A messenger from a lady of quality."

His heart began to slam back and forth in his rib case.

Michael Goddard stood erect, hands balled into fists at his thighs. "A lady? What lady?"

Then he heard the sound of running feet.

"Michael. Oh, Michael, my darling!"

God's love! He knew that voice! "Shirley! Can it be?" His wits were jumbled but he could not be mistaken in this. "It is! That perfume—different from the pouncet box Cavendish carries!"

He stumbled through the rushes on the floor, hands reaching for the iron bars. He caught them and drew himself closer as if to print their thin length against his flesh.

"Shirley!" It was a cry from his very depths. Even in his own ears it made a horrifying sound. So might a man call out from Hell itself.

"Yes, my dearest. Here. I'm here!"

Soft hands touched his own, fumbling along the bars. A mouth was on his cheek and there was scented hair tickling his ear as she pressed close. The hours he had spent dreaming of this moment during the long watches of the night as the *Devon Rose* plowed the heaving swells of the Atlantic!

The dream could never match the reality. Michael drew back a little, laughing harshly under his breath. "I must be a pretty stench in your nostrils. I've been here only God and Sir Edmund Morton know how long. In all that time I haven't washed."

"Please, dearest one. Just listen!"

Urgency was in her voice. It calmed the savage beat of his blood and brought him back to the bars. "I will. Only speak and let me hear your voice."

"There's some vile plot afoot—no, don't growl. Be quiet. Please, if you love liberty! The Queen sent men to Exeter to question me endlessly about—about certain letters you sent—Oh, I know you didn't send them, silly! But someone forged the quality of your writing and passed them off as yours. I—I read them, Michael, and—dear God! They could be no more condemning than if Philip of Spain arose at Court and named you for one of his spies!"

"Why me? Why *me*?"

"Even in Exeter we've heard of the fabulous exploits of Captain Michael Goddard! The youngest of Elizabeth's sea-



dogs but already as able as Drake or Hawkins or any of the others! Rumors came back to England, Michael. The treasure in the hold of your *Devon Rose* could build ships and buy arms to defend England against the Spanish.

"Your name was on everyone's lips. 'When Goddard drops anchor in the Thames, he sinks the Spanish fleet.' Everybody was saying it. Then Sir Edmund Morton showed up in court with—with those terrible letters. Four of them, all in your handwriting. Mailed to me. Sir Edmund claimed—as commandant of the Watch—to have intercepted them!"

"He said you turned them over to the Queen!"

"I had to admit they were addressed to me and sign the statement Lord Cavendish would have me sign or give myself and my family over to the royal torturers! Michael, I——"

She paused, sobbing faintly; he reached out to catch and squeeze her hand. "Shirley, forgive me for a stupid fool! There was no other course."

"I fought against it, but Lord Cavendish was terribly stern. He told me to account myself lucky that steps were not taken against me as being part of the Spanish plot. Father says it's only by the skin of our eyeteeth and Tryon luck that we're alive at all."

Her fingers pressed his. "I can speak no more, dearest. Alf is returning, and—— Alf?"

"Ar, milady! Coast be clear as midday. His lordship's in Southwark to attend a new play at the Rose." Keys rattled on a metal hoop in the darkness. An iron key went into the lock and turned.

The door was opening.

Michael stared in uncontrollable emotion at the little man whose furrowed face he could see in the pallid beams of the tin lanthorn. Alf knuckled a brow, grinning impudently.

"Surprises ye, don't it, Cap'n? Never thought to see yer way out of this here hole, now did ye?"

"Never, Alf!"

"It summat frightens me, the power o' gold. It'll work miracles like any saint in heaven. When milady approaches me about gettin' you free, I give 'er the back of me head. At which she rattles a purse an' I hear gold coins jingle. A powerful mort of them, Cap'n. Enough to set up Alfred

Rumstagle in a Northumberland tavern the rest of his born days. I'll change my name and lose myself so's nobody'll ever know I worked here in London Town."

While he was speaking the little man was lifting the lantern, moving down the stone corridor. When his back was turned, Shirley Tryon hurled herself at Michael. She clung to him, kissing his bearded jaw, his lips. He protested, pushing her away.

"Shirley, I smell of straw and worsel"

"I don't care! I don't care! I just want to hold you in my arms. Oh, if Father hadn't stumbled on the place where you were kept—he has influence at court, a very little—I think I would have died!"

"Cap'n! Milady!"

The whispered words carried through the darkened cellar-way, parting the man and the woman, bringing them toward the stone staircase at the far end of the long chamber. To Michael Goddard, those words and the feel of the soft hand in his own filled his veins as if with heady wine, making exultation leap into his throat.

"Can you truly hope to get me out of London, Shirley? Spirit me away from Morton and his friends? It seems impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, Michael. But you must play your part. You must be quiet. We must not be recognized. Neither of us!"

"No, no. I understand that much! Give me some credit!"

Her fingers squeezed his hand as they tiptoed up the stone stair. "Forgive me, Michael. But I've hunted so long for you! If I were to lose you now——"

"To think I ever doubted you," he rasped.

"Did you, dearest?"

"When Morton told me about those letters you turned over to him—God's blood! I knew I'd never written any—I asked myself if all the world were mad and your own sweet self a traitor to our love."

"Michael!"

They were at the landing that opened to a doorway leading into the garden hall. He drew her into his arms, seeking her

mouth. Just a moment she let him press her close and kiss her before she slipped free.

"Later, Michael darling. Right now there is no time."

Alf was at the garden door extinguishing the lanthorn. He chuckled as they approached and pointed down the path to an iron grille gate. "Coach be waiting beyond the gate, milady. Tom be a good man. None better for dependability."

"Thank you, Alf," she whispered.

The little man knuckled his brow to Goddard.

Then they were outside the grille gate on the mud and slops of the street. The coach had come as close as its big wheels would permit. The coachman was standing at the open door, face impassive.

Michael swung the woman over a puddle. "Better my feet get muddy than your slippers," he told her.

When she was inside the coach, arranging her taffeta skirt, Michael made a strange motion of his hand to the coachman. In his surprise the driver almost dropped his whip. Michael laughed and swung into the coach, closing the shuttered door behind him gently.

"What did you do just then?" asked Mistress Tryon curiously.

Michael grinned. "Coachman talk. These London drivers have a sort of sign language they speak with their hands. Here, like this." His hand moved back and forth. "That means a long trip, a good fare. This sidewise motion, now, means there's quality in the carriage. There are hundreds more."

"However did you learn it?"

"We had a man in our fishing fleet years ago who'd been a London coachman. I think he came to Devon for his health. Anyhow, he taught the trick to me. I thought I'd forgotten all about it until I saw the coachman standing straight as a statue. I wanted to break through his impassivity. I told him to get under way as fast as possible."

Michael sank back into the upholstery, letting his eyes close. There was a faint smile on his lips. He still could not believe the ease with which this miracle had been accomplished. He said as much to Mistress Tryon as the coach wheels rattled over the cobbles of Chancey Lane.



"Alf told you, dearest," she murmured. "Gold can work miracles."

He caught her hands and kissed them. "Gold and love, my darling," he whispered. "Your love."

Her lips trembled with the questions she wanted to pour out to him. Where had he hidden the jewels? How could she find them? Would he trust her enough after this rescue to tell her? She turned to him eagerly but found him on the verge of slumber. Her fingertips smoothed the unkempt hair from his forehead.

He opened his eyes to look at her. "I find I'm tired, Shirley. Exhausted by emotion and excitement."

"Sleep, dearest. We have a long ride ahead."

"Where are we going?"

"Far from London Town. To the country. Hampshire and a manor house belonging to a friend. But don't think about that now. Sleep, my darling. Sleep."

They rode in a dark little world of their own inside the coach. Michael felt a tide of weariness roll over him. His eyelids grew heavier and heavier. He did not see the stone bulk of Bridewell past which they swayed nor the motionless coach waiting for them to cross the canal. He was asleep before they trundled along Shoemaker Row and past the gardens of the Black Friars.

Mistress Tryon found her attention divided between the haggard face of the man beside her and her jumbled thoughts. Anxiety made her want to wake and ferret out of him the secret locked in his slumbering mind. Common sense told her to let him sleep. He would be even more grateful when he woke and found himself out of London Town and moving along the road to Hampshire.

She touched the leather coach curtain with her fingers and peered out. They were rattling past Newgate Market, moving into Cheapside and Corn Hill. This was a broad, open space fitted with innumerable shops and a mighty pillory. The prison looked out over this square where corn had been sold since the days of the Plantagenets. The Royal Exchange—a monument of stores and stalls opened recently for business by Queen Elizabeth herself—was to the north. Southward lay the Thames and London Bridge.

Mistress Tryon sank back into the coach upholstery with an impatient sigh. They had scarce begun their journey. It would be hours before they were in sight of Melldrum Manor. How long would Michael sleep so soundly? She nibbled her lip thoughtfully as she stared at him.

There was no sense in fussing, she told herself. Sleep would benefit her as well as him. She tried to console herself as the coach swung right onto Grace Church Street, moving through East Cheap past the Bear Inn and the bridge foot to London Bridge itself. One moment the coach was crossing the cobblestones of Thames Street, then the houses on either side of the bridge were swallowing it up. A few moments later the carriage was on Bankside, swinging south and west away from Paris Garden and Lambeth Marsh toward the rolling farmlands and great forests of Surrey.

Only when the country air, cold and damp from recent rains, moved past the shuttered curtains did Michael stir, yawning and stretching.

Mistress Shirley had been too excited to sleep. She turned toward him eagerly, whispering, "We're out of London, Michael. Safe away at last. Time for us to make plans, to talk about our future."

He laughed softly. "The only future I'm concerned about is one with you as my wife."

"Darling! And yet this trouble you're in—"

His ear caught the emotion in her voice but he misinterpreted its cause. "Oh, I'll be able to explain that business about the jewels once I have my freedom. I'll get a friend to speak for me at court."

"You know where the jewels are?"

"Of course I know where they are. I— Wait!"

They could hear the wheels of an overtaking coach. The hoofbeats of its horses made a steady tattoo on the dirt road. It was nearing them, swinging out to pass. Michael tensed, whispering between his teeth, "If that's Morton, he'll never take me alive!"

Leaning forward, he moved the leather curtain to one side so he could look out.

It was a moonlit night. The meadowlands of clover stretched away westward; he could see, tiny with distance, the lights

of a wayside inn. The coach was beside them now, the horses galloping. The driver shouted a halloo and cracked his whip. Almost in the same motion, he grounded the butt and gestured to their own coachman with a hand. Michael followed the intricate motions of those fingers with wide eyes.

Then the coach was beyond them and moving through the night. The sound of hoofbeats and creaking wheels grew faint and died away. Michael sank back into the upholstered seat and leaned his head against its cushions.

"It was just someone out of London," he said. "Probably stayed late at Staple Inn in Holborn playing cards and is eager to be home before the sunrise. Not Sir Edmund at all."

"Oh, I think we've eluded him," Shirley murmured confidently. Almost in an air of conspiracy, she turned to him. "The jewels, Michael? What about the jewels? You were talking about them. You were about to say where they were hid."

"They're on the *Devon Rose*. Just as I told Sir Edmund when he questioned me. I never lied to him, though the fool wouldn't believe that."

She glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. Hesitantly she asked, "But where on the *Devon Rose*? Surely you can tell me?"

He caught and kissed her fingers. "I can but I won't. Suppose Sir Edmund turned his attentions to you. If you knew, he'd make you tell. Not knowing, you can reveal nothing."

Mistress Tryon pouted prettily. Moving her shoulders, she announced, "I should think you could trust me, Michael. After all, if we're to be married—"

His sigh carried through the carriage. "It's to protect you that I refuse to tell you, dearest. You can understand that."

Shrewdly, Shirley Tryon guessed that further questioning would only make him suspicious. She said sweetly, "I'll insist no further. Still, if anything were to happen to you and those jewels be forever lost . . ."

Her voice trailed off. A sidewise glance showed him sitting frowning and thoughtful. After a while he said, "Maybe you're right, Shirley. Maybe I ought to tell you. After we've come to Melldrum Manor and have eaten I'll tell you all about it."

Mistress Tryon had to be content. Some time back, after



the strange coach had passed them, Michael had opened the leather curtains so that they rode with the night wind cool on their faces. When Shirley shivered he drew a lap mantle from the *cassone* on the seat across from them and put it about her legs.

They were nearly out of Surrey now, well along toward Hampshire. Twice they passed through little hamlets, trundling over narrow streets under the leaded windows of building overhangs. Here and there they saw a lighted candle in some window against an early rising. It was close to dawn.

The coachman reined off the main road onto a narrower lane that wound between tall trees. The wind made a steady soughing sound with the leaves. Were he traveling for any reason other than a flight from the anger of his Queen, Michael Goddard might have been a happy man. He loved the countryside with its smell of wild flowers and grasses.

Michael leaned forward. He could see a manor house between thick tree boles up ahead. Lights gleamed along its lower floors from half a hundred lamps and candles. Thick yew hedges grew just below the leaded windows which ran the full width of the manor house. Beyond and to the north lay stables and tool sheds. Southward the brewhouse and dairy made dark bulkings in the night. The main buildings with their wings were of oak timber and plaster, as was the style. Michael noted idly that there was no walled forecourt, common in some of the older country houses.

The coachman was dragging at the reins, talking to his horses. Wheels rattled and scraped on the stony ground. Michael had a hand on the door, opening it. As the coach swayed to a halt he leaped to the ground before the short stone steps and turned to help Shirley down.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed. There seemed to be a hidden vein of excitement in her manner. Her eyes darted from window to window. For just a moment she appeared to hesitate on the steps, then moved boldly forward.

A maidservant in mobcap and frilled apron was curtsying at the open door, staring at Michael. For a moment he thought to read a sadness on her face.

Shirley swept regally toward the big oaken doors that hid the entryway from the great hall. As she walked, her hands

loosed the clasp of her woolen cloak and let it slide from her shoulders. The maidservant ran to catch it before it touched the floor.

"Shirley—wait," Michael called.

He stood before a long refectory table with bulbous legs, staring upward at a cuirass and helmet hung before a wall shield. A long scabbard fitted with velvet and brass bosses held a long rapier. There was a matching dagger in a similar scabbard, crossing it below the cuirass.

"A white hart on a blue field spattered by fusils," he murmured. "Now whose arms will those be?"

"Robert Melldrum's," she said impatiently. "I've already told you I had friends here. Dorothy Melldrum. Sir Robert is her husband—"

She stared as he mounted a chair to step onto the tabletop. "Michael! Have you lost your mind?"

From his height he grinned down at her, lifting the rapier and dagger from pegs in the wall. He half drew the sword to eye the blade critically. He said almost to himself, "It's been a long time since I've held a sword in my hand. I couldn't resist this."

His hand drew the blued blade out of the scabbard. There was the mark of its maker inscribed in the steel just below the quillions. His hand tightened on the hilt and he made a stabbing motion. The long steel blade winked evilly in the light from the table candelabras.

The maid, her arms folded about the blue woolen cloak, was staring with wide eyes and open mouth. Michael looked at her. "You there, girl. Is the brewhouse open? The ale cold?"

She curtsied. "Aye, sir. It do be chilled by an underground spring with bricks to make a storage well."

"Fetch some," he smiled. He hopped off the table, still holding the sword and dagger. "You know," he said to Shirley, "I grew proficient at using these things on my voyage to the Spanish Main. I had a fencing master as my boatswain. He found himself in trouble over a nobleman's wife and chose to run away rather than risk being sent to Tun Prison on some trumped-up charge. He taught me a lot about swordplay. We had a go with the blades every day when weather permitted."

His smile was warm. "There was little else to do and I could dream of you at night."

"Yes, Michael. I'm sure you're very good with them. But put them back on the wall, please. After all, I'm only a guest and those things belong to Sir Robert . . ."

"Surely he won't object to my holding them for a while?" His eyebrows arched in surprise. He held the weapons out at arm's length. "I have no belt or baldric on which to hang them. I won't steal them."

She seemed close to tears. He eyed her a moment, then chuckled, "What harm if I hold them in my hands awhile?"

She said hastily, "No harm. No harm at all! Very well then, come along. We'll dine before the fireplace."

Her hand pushed open one of the doors. The room was warmed by a wide stone hearth and lighted by a dozen silver candlesticks. Shirley went to stand at the mantel, holding her hands out above the flames. She heard Michael enter but he did not close the door. Inside her boned bodice her heart was slamming fitfully. According to their plan, she had done her part. She had brought Michael Goddard to Melldrum Manor where Sir Edmund was waiting for him.

She turned from the fire to find Michael at her elbow. His blue eyes were hard as sapphires in his face. For one awful moment she thought he meant to strike her. Then that grim look was gone and he was his old, smiling self. The thought leaped into her mind, Does he know I've betrayed him?

In that moment of silence Sir Edmund Morton stepped out of an alcove door. Half a dozen men came crowding at his heels. Sir Edmund took three forward steps and opened the cover of his enameled snuffbox.

"Captain Goddard! How very good to see you!"

Michael smiled tightly. He backed until his shoulders touched the paneled wainscoting, where he shook his borrowed blade and its matching dagger free of their scabbards. More men were coming through the hall door until a full dozen crowded the walls.

"You came prepared in numbers," he said to Lord Cavendish.

Morton shrugged. His eyes had narrowed at sight of the



sword and dagger. He murmured, "You don't seem surprised. I suppose Mistress Tryon could not resist chattering."

"Shirley? Or would you prefer—Delilah? No, she kept your secret well. It was your coachman who betrayed it."

Sir Edmund admitted to honest surprise. "Ned? He could not. He was with me here at Melldrum Manor. We came on yesterday so as to be here no matter what hour you arrived."

Michael frowned. If the passing coach had not belonged to Cavendish, then—to whom? Whose coachman had it been whose finger jargon asked if Captain Goddard was inside the coach?

Michael shook his head. "I almost didn't finish out the ride, you know. The only reason I came at all after I read that coachman's fingers was that I couldn't believe Shirley would do such a thing to me. My common sense warned me to make a run for it while there was yet time. My heart bade me give her the benefit of the doubt. I listened to my heart—for the last time!"

Lord Cavendish made a motion with his hand and his hired footpads leaped forward.

## Chapter Six

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MICHAEL RAN one man through with the sword and drove the dagger into a second. He leaped sideways, freeing the bloody blade, using it as a whip to flail at the brutal faces before him.

"I want him alive!" shouted Morton.

Michael dropped the longsword and took the dagger in his right hand. He ducked a swung club and rammed the steel hanger upward into belly-flesh. A man screamed. A club caught Michael across a shoulder, numbing it. Too many, too many! his mind cautioned. He had to cut and run.

His hand caught a heavy chair and toppled it. Two men sprawled over its back rest. Michael used the dagger once again, then broke and fled. A tall leaded window loomed before him. Head down, he dove; felt glass shatter and lead muntins buckle under his charge.

Then night air was on his cheeks and he was falling into the big yew hedge, an arm across his face to protect his eyes. A knee slammed the ground hard. Almost as soon as he felt the earth he was twisting sideways, crouched down and running, using the bulk of the hedge to shelter him from eyes peering out of the broken windows.

A voice called, "After him. Outside, you louts, and catch him! Don't let him get away!"

That would be Sir Edmund, his composure shattered by the fight Michael had put up. Michael could hear him shouting even as he dove through the hedges twenty feet from the stables but he could not make out his words.

The stable door was open. Michael ran for it, diving into its sheltering darkness. He waited, huddled over in the black-

ness, savoring the warm smell of horseflesh mixed with that of oats and old wood. Sir Edmund would not have expected him to get away. The advantage of surprise was still on his side.

He rose and moved along the row of stalls. Moonlight was his ally, too. He made out half a dozen horses tethered to their rings. A big gray stallion—a riding animal, to judge by his clean look and long legs—stamped noisily on the floorboards at his approach.

“Go easy,” Michael whispered, touching the smooth flank with a reassuring palm.

His free hand whipped loose the dangling headstall. No time to find saddle and stirrups. It was ride bareback or be caught and dragged back for Sir Edmund’s torturing. Michael stabbed with his foot, finding a mounting block, lifting onto the back of the big gray.

The animal was skittish. Michael laughed under his breath. “I’ll give you a chance to loose your energy!” he whispered.

He used the hackamore to rein the horse toward the rear of the stables. He dared not use the driveway door. Morton’s bullies would be out there hunting for him. As it was, they’d hear the gray’s hoofbeats soon enough.

There was a tall double door at the other end of the stable. Unfastening its latches, Michael walked the stallion through, then toed it into a gallop. Out here in the pastures the grass was thick and heavy. It deadened the steady tattoo of the hooves. He rode hunched over the gray’s neck, its mane whipping his face, until they were a mile or more from the manor house. Twice he jumped the stallion over stone fences.

He was on a narrow country road scarce wide enough for a drayman’s cart when the dizziness hit him. He had to rein in the animal and sit with a hand clinging to its silky mane, telling himself that a lack of food was the only trouble with him. *A wonder I did what I did this night, considering the emptiness of my stomach!* He must find an inn.

And after he found it, then what?

He had no money with which to purchase a slice of mutton and some bread. Laughter bubbled inside him. Hysterical laughter, he realized as he fought against it. With his share



from the cargo of the *Devon Rose* he was one of the richest men in the south of England. The same cargo that Lord Cavendish had impounded and meant to torture him over, in the name of Queen Bess! He was worth more than a hundred thousand pounds yet he hadn't even a copper farthing to call his own.

He rode the horse for a long distance. Ten miles? Twenty miles? He did not know. When he was exhausted he slid off its back and onto his front in a ditch. He slept with the hackamore rein knotted around an arm to prevent the gray from wandering off.

He dreamed of a woman in a black cloak whose face was hidden by the furred edge of its cowl. She sat a horse and smiled gently down at him as he lay sleeping by the side of the road. There were men with her, hard fellows armed with long-barreled pistols and swords, with muskets and axes. He did not count them but there must have been upwards of fifty.

He heard words, too, in his restless slumber.

"Shall we lift and carry him, milady?"

"No, no. Let him sleep. When he wakes he must think he comes to me of his own will. He'll be suspicious and afraid."

"How can we know he'll come to the right place?"

"I'll send a traveling tinker to him. The tinker will bring him to The Stag."

"If Morton doesn't get his claws into him afore that."

The woman in the furred cowl smiled sweetly. "You'll see to that, good Hugh. You and your men will line the forest paths and keep Lord Cavendish away. When dawn comes and Captain Goddard wakes you can slip away unseen. All I ask is that you guard him."

"With our lives, milady."

Michael tried to rise, to call out to her. He wanted her to explain the words she'd spoken to him in Plymouth Town. A strange lethargy gripped his muscles, however, so that he could only lie here between sleeping and waking and hear the diminishing beat of galloping hooves.

The sun was high in the sky when he woke.

He rose to his feet, swaying a little. Weaker than he thought,

he considered, stretching. The dizziness was coming back to him, mixed with lightheadedness. He decided that he might only be hungry. Crossing the road, he went to a split-rail fence and leaned elbows on it.

As far as he could see there were only open fields and forests. The industrialization of the country, which had begun with the ironmongers in Sussex and Kent and the sugar refineries in London itself, did not extend this far into Hampshire. He had heard rumors of a vast increase in the coal trade at Newcastle, of the importance of Lancashire as a clothing goods center, of improved methods of saltmaking along the Tyne and the Wear, but he could never believe this just from looking around him.

In the distance, to the north toward the Berkshire hills, he saw apple and peach orchards and fields of waving grain. A wind off the North Downs rippled that sea of grass as he had seen the wind ripple the calm surface of the Caribbean. The road where he stood extended for miles straight ahead, its dirt surface barred by shafts of sunlight gleaming through rents in the overhead boughs. Birds were chirping in the chestnut trees. The sun on his back was warm and friendly. It was a good time to be alive.

The tinkle of bells swung him around. He fought an inclination to rub his eyes. A tinker and his wagon were approaching by a narrow side road. Vividly he recalled his dream and the words of the cloaked woman. *I'll send a traveling tinker to him.* The short hairs on his neck began to rise.

He waited until the wagon turned onto the main road. The tinker was quite ordinary. He wore cheap woolen breeches and a patched jerkin. Michael noted that the right leg of his breeks was reinforced with a strip of leather. His face was weather-beaten and showed traces of an inborn shrewdness. Seeing that he was being stared at with something of a suspicious eye, the tinker nodded affably.

"A good day, sir. Filled with sunlight and God's goodness."

"Where's the woman who sent you?"

The tinker looked startled. "Woman who sent me? Bless you, boy. No woman has sent me anywhere since my Molly died eight years ago."

"A woman in a cloak and furred hood. A lady of quality."

The man shook his head in puzzled fashion. He listened quietly as Michael related everything he had dreamed. "True, I know the location of The Stag. It beant far, just up the road a few miles and around the bend. How you came to dream of it, though, and of me—lord, here's a mystery!"

Michael looked askance at the man as he said, "I know how I came to dream of it. Because it was no dream. It was reality. Half-awake, yet still asleep, reality took on the aspect of a dream. The woman was there beside the ditch where I slept. And fifty men were with her. The proof? This morning I met a tinker and there is such a tavern as The Stag."

The tinker nodded and jiggled the reins. "It could be that way, young sir. And yet it may be you had a prophetic dream sent by a witch who lives in these parts. I mind the time I dreamed I was in Hell and woke to find the rushes on my cottage floor aflame. I left a golden 'angel'—not that I could afford such a fine coin, mind—on the lightning-blasted tree stump near the hollow for her, after that experience!"

Michael grunted his skepticism but mounted and followed the tinker.

They came to the inn toward high noon. It was surrounded by a stone fence, and there was a great wooden sign hanging on rusty chains over its wide gateway. When he was near enough to read its legend—it showed a deerhead and the words THE STAG half effaced by wind and rain—he saw also that there were a number of riding horses at the hitching rail. The open end of a blacksmith's shop was connected to the inn building by a roofed walk.

He slid off the stallion and waved farewell to the tinker. Then he walked the animal toward the forge. A big man with a coarse apron covering his chest and middle put down the tongs by which he held an iron shoe, resting his huge hammer on the anvil. There was soot on the smith's face that made his teeth glisten whitely as he grinned.

"I need money," Michael said, "and all I have to trade is this fine animal."

The smith scratched his chin, put down his hammer very carefully and came to walk twice around the big gray. "A mort o' horseflesh, this one."



"Worth a guinea, at least."

"Worth twenty of them," the smith agreed. "In an honest sale. However!" He walked around the horse again, eyes alert. "If anyone recognized him, I might be out the guinea."

"There's no mark of ownership."

"The quality owned him. I can tell the way he's been cared for. I used to work for quality." His hand slapped the muscular flank. "Tell ee what. I'll give ee a guinea and a change of clothes, together with a breakfast of pork, eggs and pastry and as much cold ale as you can swallow, for him."

Michael held out his hand. After a brief hesitation, the smith took it. "Ee don't look like a jackanapes. Might be I'm not taking as much risk as I think." He smiled faintly. "I own a farm near the Downs. I'll keep him there. We have few travelers that far off the highway. Meg!"

A serving girl came running, mobcap bouncing on her brown hair in rhythm to the bobble of her breasts in a thin linen undersmock. She wore a woolen skirt and a placard of orange wadmol, which was a coarse textile much used for doublets and jerkins. Michael noted that her waist was as slim as her bosom was full. At sight of him the girl stopped short, staring.

The smith laughed. "Aye, Meg. I called ee. I've a stranger here wants putting up. And food. And a change of clothes. Can ee see to it?"

Meg curtsied breathlessly. "Oh yes, Master Walter. At once, sir."

The smith grinned at Michael. "That's me. Walter Hillard, master smith and ironworker. We own the inn, me and my missus. Missus runs affairs inside while I care for 'em out here. Meg'll see you're not cheated."

He turned back to the forge and reached for the long bel-lows handles. Michael watched him a moment. He liked this big, fleshy man with the huge shoulders and laughing eyes. There was an air of honesty about him, a sense of rugged competence, that he admired. Twice the hammer clanged on the iron horseshoe before he felt the touch at his elbow.

The girl curtsied when he looked at her. "Master Walter said I was to feed you, sir. Please to follow me."

"A pleasure, Meg," he said.

Her long lashes lifted and for a moment Michael Goddard felt that he was drowning in two brown, bottomless pools of laughter. He could not quite decide whether those eyes laughed with him or at him in a kind of mischievous mockery. All he knew was that his heart was suddenly flopping over. He found himself strangely afflicted with a breathlessness that held him tongue-tied.

"Well, sir? Come along!"

Now he knew she laughed at him, but the fact only seemed to please him in some silly, boyish way. For her laughter was tender, as one might laugh at a rollicking pet. He went after her at a fast walk, studying the appearance and disappearance of her slim ankles under the swaying skirt. He did not see Walter Hillard turn from his anvil and, without missing a stroke of the hammer, look after him in a serious thoughtful way.

The inn was far longer than it was wide. From the back, past the smithy shed, Michael could look in through the open windows to the big kitchen where two large fireplaces held turning spits. Built half of Berkshire stone, half of timber, it boasted twin bays at its front, heavy with leaded panes, and a wide oak doorway. Its second story was formed with an overhang. Three gables decorated the sloping roof.

The girl was waiting on the back stairs that led from the yard into the kitchens. For the first time, as he climbed the treads, he had a good opportunity to study her. She was as tall as his heart, which he thought the perfect height for a woman. Under the loose skirt her ankles and what he could see of the calves above them were slim and prettily shaped. The laughter was still in her eyes, and her lips—full and red and faintly pouting—twitched in sympathy to her amusement.

"You take your time, sirrah," she flung at him with a pert toss of her head. "For a penniless adventurer, you pry and peer into nooks and crannies like the mistress herself."

"And every look fills me with more and more admiration. I've never seen an inn so well tended. Nor," he added, slipping an arm about her slim middle, "such a pretty maid-servant."

She would have twisted away but his arm held her pressed against him. Michael found her softness exciting. Beneath the skirt and wadmol bodice, he found only Meg herself. Anger dawned in her eyes but he ignored that to bend and press a kiss on those pouting lips.

This time she did twist free, hand lifting toward his cheek in a short, hard swing. Her palm landed with a loud *splaat*. Michael whistled and felt his stinging flesh. Repentance struck him suddenly. In the past, he'd bussed and pinched more than one serving wench in the taverns of Exeter and Sutton Pool. It was an accepted custom of the times, he reflected, remembering Agatha Simons. Yet there was something about Meg, a glance from her eyes or the manner in which her head tilted, that told him she was no ordinary servant.

He said, "I'm sorry. I meant no offense. Think of my kiss as a compliment to your good looks."

Her anger fled before sudden laughter. Meg caught him by the hand. "Marry, we grow too sober for such a lovely day." She paused, standing very close to him. Her fingertips lifted to touch his cheek. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Her brown eyes drew him after her through a wide room with plastered walls and long serving tables laden with platters of steaming meat and vegetables. A dog walked slowly inside a turnspit to which was attached the shaft that revolved slowly in rhythm to the pacing dog. Three serving wenches giggled, slicing bread and setting tarts on trays while they eyed him boldly. An older woman in a maroon flocket over which she wore a durance apron stared from the far hearth where she basted half an ox. This would be the mistress, Dame Hillard.

As they moved through the kitchen into a wainscoted room with leaded windows opening onto the carriage house, it seemed to Michael that Meg let her hips sway just a bit too much for the decorum she seemed to favor. Her hand gestured him toward a bench.

"I'll serve you sausages and eggs first. Then you can wash and have the change of clothes you need so much."

"Nay, now. I think I'll wash first, then change and eat. I learned cleanliness in the Indies where—"

He broke off, wondering whether the girl would notice his slip. If Cavendish were to come hunting Captain Goddard and learned the ragged stranger with an expensive horse for sale was familiar with the Indies, he might as well give himself up now. To his relief, Meg was shrugging a shoulder in the doorway.

"There's a rain barrel behind the stables," she told him. "If that lazy Tom has filled it, you can have your bath. Wait for me. I'll fetch fresh garments."

The rain barrel was full. Michael let the water run over his hard nakedness in a steady stream, using a wedge of Coventry soap to make a mass of suds. The sun beat down over the top of the boardings that gave privacy to the bathing room. It felt good on his wide shoulders. After a moment he began to sing "The Hunt Is Up" with more noise than tune.

When he was washed clean and dry he slipped on a linen shirt and a doublet, trunk hose with cannions, and hose. There was a leather jerkin, sleeveless and tight to the chest, ending at his middle, and a pair of red cordovan boots. To his amazement, the garments fitted snugly.

Meg was waiting as he came around the corner of the stables. When she saw him her eyes widened a little. Michael laughed.

"I'm not such a bad fellow in decent clothes, now am I?" he chuckled. Staring down at himself, he added, "You must have used your eyes to good advantage, Meg. I couldn't have done better with a guildhall draper."

"You're a proper gentleman," she smiled, tilting her head sideways the better to regard him. "I could see that right off, even through those rags you wore."

She seemed disposed to linger, and Michael, though his stomach felt as if it were touching his spine, was content. Twice she sauntered around him, staring him up and down, before he laughed and turned to grip her by the waist and swing her onto the tail gate of a pony cart.

"You've looked your fill," he told her. "Now it's my turn."

Meg was good to look at. The sunlight was his ally, piercing the thin cambric of her undersmock to reveal a little of the skin tints of her rather fulsome breasts where they protruded



over the bodice of her laced stomacher. What he could see of her legs where the woolen skirt lay on them was rewarding. They were shapely and pleasantly curved. Her feet in black leather slippers were almost tiny.

"You're newly back in England, aren't you?" she asked suddenly.

"Now how would you be guessing that?"

"The song you sang. 'The Hunt Is Up.' Nobody ever sings that any more. 'Westron Wynde' is popular now, or 'Back and Side Go Bare.' And your clothes! They were in rags but I could see enough of their cut to know they weren't the latest fashion."

"I could be from the North Country. They're backward that close to the Scots border."

She smiled sweetly. "You've no Northumberland twang. No, no. You come from Dorset or Devonshire. Am I right?"

Michael nodded between amusement and consternation. This sly minx used her eyes like a red Indian of the Americas. He wondered what other guesses she might make and how close she might come to the target of his identity.

Meg studied her slippered foot. "A while ago you mentioned the Indies. They're not so far from the Spanish Main. Have you ever been there?"

"Do I look like a sailor?"

Her brown eyes slid sideways, studying him. "Like a gentleman-adventurer, rather. What's your name?"

"Michael."

"Ah," she said gently, and smiled.

She held out her arms for him to lower her to the ground. When he held her against him, with her slippers a good foot above the hard-packed dirt driveway, he chuckled.

"It's my turn again, mistress busybody. Are you married? Spoken for? How did a beauty like you come to work in a wayside inn?"

Meg wriggled, eyes wide and challenging as she stared down at him. A flush sat redly in her cheeks; for an instant Michael thought she might be angry. Instead she laughed breathlessly with a catch in her throat.

"Not that it concerns you, mind, but I'm unmarried and

unspoken for. Walter Hillard is my godfather and his wife, my godmother. They treat me like their daughter. I'm an orphan."

He lowered her gently. Her manner was alert and watchful. She thinks I mean to kiss her again, he thought. He said suddenly, "God's blood! I'd almost forgotten Master Hillard owes me a goodly meal. My stomach tells me it's no small part of our little trade."

Michael found that he was ravenous. He finished the eggs and sausages, a mutton pie, a lamprey pie, and half a dozen berry tarts. He washed all this down with chilled Midlands ale. As he ate he was vaguely conscious of the creak of carriage wheels, the rapid beat of hooves, the cries of men made jovial by wine. It was a little past noon. He guessed some of the local gentry were at The Stag for a suckling pig or a boar's head.

Momentarily he expected to be confronted by the woman in the cloak and furred cowl. Why otherwise had she come to him last night while he lay sleeping in the roadside ditch? It had been reality and no dream. He was positive of that. The woman wanted him to come to The Stag. Now he was here.

Why was she waiting to put in an appearance?

He was opening a lead-paned window that looked out over the carriage yard when he heard the cry. Turning, he moved into the kitchen. Mistress Hillard was standing at the big hearth, back rigid. When she heard his light step she whirled.

"The gentry do be pinching the girls or worse," she said with a tight-lipped frown.

The woman moved toward the kitchen door that led, Michael discovered as he followed her, into the long room. A party of roisterers at one of the larger tables had caught two of the maidservants and dragged them down onto their laps. One of the girls Michael did not know. The other was Meg.

"I'll have to fetch Walter," said his wife dolefully. "There'll be broken noggins this day. Walter is strong but sometime one of the gentry will tire of testing the weight of his fists and use a pistol on him."

Michael drew a deep breath. You fool! Cavendish will be scouring the countryside for you! The woman in the furred cowl may be sending word to join her any minute now. Waste no time here because a pretty girl gets her rump pinched and her bosom looked at! Yet he could never walk out of this wayside inn and leave behind the sight of this man holding a struggling Meg in the crook of his left arm while his right hand undid the laces of her placard.

His friends were urging him on with laughing gibes.

"A score of silver groats she's not as large as Molly of the Green Horse!"

"Nor as solid, Hal!"

Meg fought silently. Her face was scarlet with mixed shame and fury. Her left hand, which had left scratches above the forked beard of the laughing Hal, was clamped at her thigh by his fingers. Her right arm was pinned between his chest and her side. A second man was reaching for her skirt to throw it back and reveal her legs.

Michael smiled down at Mistress Hillard. "Allow me, good dame. Your Walter doesn't understand these men as I do."

He walked through the long room in an almost leisurely manner, pausing to lift a pewter tankard of cold ale from the tray of a third girl who cowered against the paneled wainscoting. She looked at him out of frightened eyes. He wanted to say, They mean no harm, really. It's only the malmsey working in their veins and high good spirits. If it weren't Meg being so rudely undressed he might have gone on about his business. They would only look and laugh and pinch a little. They would go further only with encouragement.

Michael carried the tankard—filled to the brim, he saw with delight—toward the table. When he was behind the man with the forked beard he upended the tankard, pouring its cold contents over the curling hair, the cartwheel ruff and slashed doublet.

The men at the table gaped.

The man named Hal let out a strangled roar. He surged to his feet, sending Meg flying in a tangle of whipping skirts and open placard. Ale dripped from his eyebrows, chin and clothing.

"God's my lifel" he gasped wetly.

He swung about, still gasping. Michael read speechless rage in his blazing eyes and knew a tremendous pleasure at the thought of how cold and wet the ale must be, trickling down inside his clothing.

"Fe-fellow," said the man at last. "Fellow, for this I shall kill you!"

Michael shrugged. Meg was on her feet, fingers flying as they laced up her open stomacher. Her mobcap had come off and thick brown hair flooded across her shoulders. The spots of red in her cheeks were fading before a pinched whiteness. Her brown eyes stared hard at Michael but he could not read their expression.

Michael shrugged. "I'm at your pleasure," he announced. "Indoors or out, it makes no difference."

A number of the diners carried rapiers and daggers in ornate baldrics. They held them out to Sir Henry Middleton, begging him to use their steel. He ran his eyes over the hilts, then selected two.

His hand gestured Michael to precede him in his choice of weapons. "These are the best blades," he said agreeably. "Of good Sheffield steel, made and tempered by master craftsmen."

Michael whipped out one of the rapiers and tested it. It balanced perfectly; when bent and released, the blade sang softly.

Mistress Hillard was tearful, staring round-eyed at the swords. "We want no trouble at The Stag, young gentlemen!"

Sir Henry bowed. "No trouble at all, good dame. I'll blood my tormentor in the chest, then return to resume our interrupted meal." He pinched the cheek of one of the maid-servants as he walked toward the front door. "Mind-you keep the boar's head warm, Nell!"

Meg clung to Michael a moment before she felt Mistress Hillard staring. "Be careful. Oh, do be careful!"

"Why, I will that," he nodded in surprise, touched by her emotion. "However, let your mind be at ease. Sir Henry is a bully, and bullies garnish their reputations against inferior swordsmen."



"I hadn't thought you could spare the time to help serving girls," she murmured.

Michael chuckled. "I'm in no hurry to go wherever it is I'm going. I have time to flesh my friend Middleton once or twice."

She seemed about to speak but only shook her head. Under some hidden compulsion Michael bent to kiss her fingers. She gasped and stared, frowning. Then he was gone from the timbered room.

## Chapter Seven

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SIR HENRY waited beyond a rail fence in a grassy field. One of his friends was stripping him of doublet and shirt. Bared to the middle, he seemed lean and fit. As Michael came up, he laughed and paused in his bantering with his friends.

"Fellow," he called. "I won't kill you. I'll only wound you in an arm and a leg to teach you manners. I find the world too bright a place today to cause a man to die."

Michael paused with his jerkin half off. In surprise, he said, "Why, that's generous of you, Sir Henry. In return, I promise only to wound you twice myself. I'll leave the naming of the places to your own judgment."

One of the men howled with laughter. "Hal, he's priceless. Where do you want him to wound you?"

Middleton laughed and scratched his forkbeard. "Well, now. Suppose I say my left knee and—my left buttock."

His followers roared in delight.

"His left knee is always turned away from his opponent!"

"And his left-hand rump is behind him!"

Michael grinned. He was beginning to like these young country gentlemen. They were high-spirited and not above a jest. The sun was warm on his naked chest. His middle was full of good food. If it were not for Sir Edmund Morton and the Queen's displeasure he would be relishing the moment.

He made his blade sing, whipping it up in a salute to Middleton. Sir Henry stared, then saluted in turn. Michael saw him fall into the elastic crouch that marked him for a student of the Italian school.

The blades crossed and recrossed as each man felt out the defenses of the other. A hundred years before a sword had been a long, stiffly unwieldy weapon. A man hacked and

sliced with it and needed a shield to hide behind when he missed a stroke. Now the rapier was buckler as well as point. Twice Michael turned Sir Henry's lunges with the twist of a thick wrist. He saw respect dawn in the black eyes that looked at him over the knuckle bow of his sword.

Sir Henry called, "A purse of groats I take him as I said, Mark!"

"An unfair wager, Hall" a voice cried.

The man named Mark said, "Not so unfair. I think our Hal has met his match this day. All right, Middleton. I'll wager."

It was as if Sir Henry waited only this reassurance. He stamped in, his blade feinting, darting from one point of attack to another. When he was sure that Michael was out of position he came forward in a straight lunge. His blade was a blue blur in the sunlight. But Michael was not where he wanted him. At the last moment his own blade moved in a parry that merged into a thrusting riposte.

Sir Henry was off-balance, extended in his lunge; he could not recover that balance in time. Michael let his riposte go as far as the Middleton left knee. As he drew back, blood began to soak through the cannon and stocking.

Mark said softly, "First blood for my man, Hall! Shall we look at your wound?"

Michael drew back and watched emotion play across the features of Sir Henry. Pain was written there and devil-may-care recklessness. Sir Henry would be a poorer opponent because of that wound. Already he was on his way to losing a fair amount of blood.

Michael pointed this out. "It wouldn't be fair to your own wager for you to ignore the wound. You'd only make it easier for Mark and myself to win."

Sir Henry hesitated. He growled, "It isn't the purse of coins I mind so much as—"

Michael chuckled. "As it is your cursed pride, eh? Well now, don't feel too badly. I was a pupil of 'Devil Dan' O'Rourke some while ago. His prize pupil, he used to say."

Middleton stared. "'Devil Dan' hasn't been in London for ten years. I've heard my father speak of him. He ran away to sea."

Michael winked. "The planks of a poop deck heaving in an

ocean swell make a fine fencing strip. It teaches a man balance, if nothing else."

Sir Henry looked around him and shrugged. "All right, damn my eyes. Doctor me up, Ned, if you've got your kit."

Ned held up a small teakwood box. "Always carry it in my coach," he told Michael. "Most especially since Hal and I became good friends. Never thought to use this gauze and salve on his flesh, though. It's always been the other——"

"Oh, shut up, Ned, and get to work!" grumbled Sir Henry, permitting Mark to lower him onto a fallen tree trunk.

Michael drew closer as Middleton extended his left leg. He watched Ned cut away the cannon and stocking with the edge of a stiletto and wash out the wound with well water that another man brought on the run. Sir Henry cursed and grumbled.

Hoofbeats sounded along the road. They grew louder until they were a steady pulse in the ears of every man listening.

Middleton grunted, "Cavendish is out with his bullies. Some poor devil's got away from him."

Michael straightened suddenly. His mind had been so fixed upon the wounded Middleton that he'd forgotten his own troubles. "Cavendish?" he asked sharply. "Sir Edmund Morton?"

Mark turned and stared. "The same. He isn't loved around Hampshire. Some folks say he's an Ulster man from Ireland."

Michael held out his rapier and dagger to its owner. As they all watched he said to the goggling Sir Henry, "Your indulgence, my lord. I find myself shipwrecked in the sea of circumstance. I dare not remain longer to enjoy your swordsmanship. If you'll permit me a postponement?"

Middleton gave out a rich bellow of laughter. "God's my life, Mark! You hear? I'm the wounded one, yet my tormentor requests the postponement. Yes, yes, whoever you are. The postponement is yours. Until we meet again! Stay—a moment more. Your name?"

Michael sighed. The hoofbeats were very close now. He said softly, "Godby, gentlemen. Captain Godby."

He waited no longer but took to his heels, running for the rail fence and vaulting it, then legging it toward the big stand of ancient oaks and chestnuts that formed this corner of the



inn property. Once inside those dark, leafy vaults he would have a good chance to slip away from Lord Cavendish.

The hoofbeats had halted. Against his will, Michael paused at the cool edge of the forest to stare back across the fields toward the dozen horsemen waiting while Sir Edmund Morton bent to speak to the gentry beside the fallen log. He saw Mark help Sir Henry to his feet and assist him to limp toward the rail fence where Cavendish impatiently flicked the air with a riding stick.

He was too far away to hear words, but he saw Middleton raise his right arm and point down the road that wound past The Stag and continued south and west toward the Downs. For a moment Sir Edmund sat his saddle leaning forward, hands clasped on its pommel, talking swiftly. Then he wheeled his mount and waved his right arm high. He and his dozen bullies disappeared beyond the tavern in a cloud of yellow dust.

"Michael?"

He turned to find Meg a dozen paces away, staring all around her yet unable to see him in the underbrush. Michael stood motionless, content merely to look at her, to discover the frills of her mobcap as it rested on her thick brown hair and the manner in which the wind pressed the durance skirt against her legs. His heart was pounding heavily; he wondered whether it was recent excitement or the sight of this maidservant that made it slam so wildly.

"Meg—over here!" he cried at last.

She came running, skirt held up to give free play to her moving legs. She was about to throw herself into his arms—expecting it, he was braced to catch and hold her—when she halted suddenly as if remembering her dignity.

"It was a fine thing you did for me in the long room," she said breathlessly. "I want to repay you as best I can."

"I want no pay."

She shook her head. "I'm putting this badly, I know. But the horse you brought Master Walter. The gray. I'm buying him back and giving him to you."

He thought of the long miles that lay ahead of him before he might consider himself safely away from Lord Cavendish. He grinned suddenly as the ache went out of his legs. "Why,

that's a fine present. If I thought from now till doomsday I couldn't think of a better."

When he would have stepped out of the woods she caught him by the arm, making a sudden gesture. Her head tipped forward and her eyes ran from the grassy field along the road that turned past The Stag toward the Downs country.

"You should be careful," she told him, flushing at his regard. "It isn't only Sir Edmund Morton you must beware."

"What do you know about Sir Edmund?"

"I hear gossip. I know he commands the Dock Watch and that he's like a watchdog for the Queen. Everyone says she depends on him to make sure she isn't cheated by her sea rovers."

Anger made him say, "Then she should find herself another watchdog! Doesn't she know every man jack of her gentlemen adventurers would die for her? That they'd sooner cut off their arms than cheat her of a copper pence?"

Meg shrugged. "All I know is what the gentry say in the long room. Of course one or two of them claim Lord Cavendish created his own post, so to speak. He himself brought up the possibility of double-dealing. To keep him quiet, the Queen signed the appointment papers."

She tiptoed forward. Her hand tugged him in her wake across the field and over the rail fence. Twice he squeezed her fingers, savoring their softness. He thought idly of Mistress Shirley Tryon and tried to picture her helping him evade the law as this serving wench was doing. True, Meg was not sure he was at outs with the Queen's men but she was smart enough to make a good guess. She'd seen Cavendish speaking with Sir Henry Middleton.

They ran across the road and through the little wooden gate that gave entrance onto a flagged walk leading past the smithy shed. Walter Hillard stood beside his forge fires watching them with a glum expression.

"I don't like this, Meg," he growled, eying Michael as if he would gladly strangle him with one soot-blackened hand. "I don't like it e'en a little bit."

Meg brushed past him, still holding Michael's hand. The blacksmith made an angry, rumbling sound in his chest and came after them. In the shadows of a tool shed two horses

stood bridled and saddled. One was his gray, Michael saw. The other was a sleek bay mare.

"Help me up, Michael!"

He went to stand beside the bay, his hands forming a cup for her tiny, slippered foot. Marry, how light she is! he thought as she rose into the sidesaddle, right knee hooking about the horn. Her eyes dropped to meet his gaze and she flushed a little at the admiration she could read so plainly.

Walter Hillard grumbled, "Galloping over the countryside wi' Morton running loose! You'd be safer in the inn, Meg dear."

The girl laughed. "You saw Michael fight Sir Henry, Walter. I saw you peeping through the yew hedge! Admit it! He handles the steel as well as any man you've ever seen. Better even than the runagate, Charles Calverly."

"Oh, aye. He's glib wi' his hanger."

"Then he's all the protection I'll need."

Walter cleared his throat and looked at the sky. Frowning darkly, he lowered his gaze to the ground. After a long moment he sighed lugubriously. "Then wait, Meg. I'll find a blade for him and a pair o' snappers."

Meg glanced at Michael triumphantly while the heavy-set blacksmith trudged across the innyard. "He likes you, Michael. He thinks you're something of a fighter, too, or he'd never let me go off alone with you like this."

"He seems to care a great deal about what happens to his servants," Michael commented. At a sudden thought he said, "There may be danger where I ride. Besides, I have no money. It might be better if you let me go alone."

Her laughter bubbled richly. "Michael, do you think I'm riding off to live in sin with you? No, no. I've a place in mind to hide you. I only guide you there. Tomorrow I'll return to The Stag. And I'll find a way to put some coins in your purse before we're done."

He frowned. "For a servant girl you act most independently. Watching you with Walter, it almost seems he's the servant and you're the mistress."

Meg nodded animatedly. "He always did say I put on too many airs. But here he comes now with a baldric and a brace of pistols."

The blacksmith thrust the sword and dagger into Michael's hands with a curt, "You needn't examine them. There isn't time. But ee'll go a far piece before ee finds better steel nor that." He hesitated, then growled, "I know ee can use the blade. I've seen ee wi' Sir Henry. As for these hand pieces, now—these snappers, as the gentry names them—"

Michael chuckled, setting the plain leather baldric over a shoulder. "Rest easy, Master Hillard. I've pinked more than one man with such pistols. I'm accounted a better than fair shot."

The blacksmith looked interested. "Say ye so? Now if I might test this markmanship—that bottle on yonder stone wall. You see it?"

Meg muttered, "We have no time. Sir Edmund will be coming back when he learns he's been flummoxed." But she made no move to rein her bay mare toward the drive. It was almost as if she too were desirous of learning how creditably Michael Goddard could shoot a handgun.

Michael checked the charge, the flint and steel. Then he took the kidney butt into his hand and looked at the bottle. He shook his head. "Too easy," he smiled. "I'll try instead for the hoe handle leaning against the barn."

Walter admitted, "'Tis a mark that; if you hit it, might make you winner in a May Day Fair target shoot."

The long-barreled pistol came up. Michael sighted along its gleaming length an instant before his finger squeezed the trigger. The snapper roared.

Splinters flew from the broken hoe handle.

"God's blood!" shouted Walter Hillard.

Meg laughed, and there was a curious kind of triumph in her mirth. Michael stared at her as he poured powder and rammed home a fresh patch and ball with a rod. Now why should Mistress Meg be so pleased with my accomplishment? he asked himself. It could be, of course, that since she'd attached herself to him she considered him something of her personal property. Yet the feeling persisted that her delight went deeper than that. It was almost as if he'd been put to a test and had passed with something to spare.

"Do I need more protection than Master Michael with his pistols, Walter?" she cried out.



The smith shook his head. "No. Ee has all the protection ee'll need, Meg. And so—be off wi' yel"

Meg slapped the bay mare and was across the yard before Michael could put toe to the big gray. He followed her at a pounding gallop, aware that his spirits were soaring higher than at any time since he'd sighted the red rocks of southern Cornwall from the Atlantic. It was good to be alive and back in Merry England with a pretty girl before him and the wind in his ears. Even if Queen Bess and Lord Cavendish wanted him dead, what of it? No man went through a lifetime without troubles of some sort!

He had a fast horse, two good pistols and a fine rapier. The rest was up to him!

When the sun was a red ball lowering beyond Salisbury Plain, Meg turned onto a winding road that led between fenced fields toward a big manor house. The house was built of gray fieldstone with tall leaded windows forming bays and oriels. Its roof was gabled and moss hung like a cape over its north wall. Michael found it most impressive. In all his memory he had never entered such a home as this, with its brickwork and stone gatehouse, its high stone fence and spacious forecourt.

"Faith! Is this the hiding place you've chosen for me?" he asked gloomily. "This magnificent stone pile? It stands out like a bandaged thumb on a lady in waiting!"

Meg said spiritedly, "It belongs to Her Grace the Duchess of Sunderland!"

"Does it now? And what will Her Grace say when she learns a tavern maid has taken it over to house a man she's known for less than a day?"

"Her Grace is about the Queen's business. She stays often away from this house. She has many others."

He gloomed at her darkly. "You know overmuch about her affairs, it seems."

"Pah! Why must you quarrel with me? If you think you'll not be safe here—why, then, ride on and be damned to you!"

Michael reined up, surprise powering his muscles. Meg was glowering at him, eyes very bright. There were spots of color in her cheeks and her lips were set in a thin line. Almost

musingly he murmured, "You curse like a duchess yourself, girl. And your speech—Walter is the master, but he speaks in a Hampshire dialect, while, you—God save the mark!—talk as if you'd been educated by the Queen's tutor, Roger Ascham himself!"

"Now it's my speech you find fault with!"

He shrugged. "I only consider my neck. I've had it so long I've taken a fancy to it. I wouldn't like to see it stretched by a rope or put under the headsman's ax. If you honestly mean to hide me, why bring me to such a place?"

"You see, I only ask myself certain questions in order to feel more comfortable. I ask, 'Who is this girl who plays at being a serving maid yet seems as educated as anyone I've ever met?' Also I say, 'It might be she's in league with the Spanish party herself and means to bring me into a trap.' I escaped one trap into which a female led me less than twenty-four hours ago."

"Ride on! Go before me, sir! Ride away and leave me!"

"Can't you listen to reason?" he asked amiably. "If you've no guilty conscience, you can tell me what I want to know."

Meg nibbled her lip, eying him strangely. At last she sighed and said, "Not yet, not yet. Perhaps in a little while, but until then you'll have to trust me."

Michael grunted. He put his hands on the smooth kidney butts of the long-barreled pistols as if to assure himself of their readiness. He hesitated between a laugh and a curse. Alone, he had no chance against Cavendish unless he fled the country in a fishing smack. Sooner or later Sir Edmund Morton would catch up with him if he remained in England. And he had no intention of running before he cleared his name.

He would need help. The thought came to him that Meg trusted him enough to give him back his horse and come herself to guide him to this manor house. He could trust her, in return. And yet the memory of the false Shirley Tryon ran a cold chill down his spine.

His hand lifted out a pistol and jammed it back into its leather holster. "I'll trust you. God save the mark, I have to!"

Meg toed her mare so close that her knee nudged his own. Leaning forward, she drove her palm hard against his cheek. Eyes snapping, she cried, "That's for mistrusting me at all!"

She slid from the saddle before he could do more than goggle at her. With reins in hand she walked toward the gatehouse door. As she lifted the iron knocker she looked back at him.

"Suit yourself, sirrah. I stay overnight at Sunderland House. You can do what you want."

Her attitude suggested that he could ride west to Devon and through Cornwall to Land's End and beyond, to drown himself in the sea, for all she cared. Rubbing his smarting cheek, Michael reflected, *For a small girl she has the strength of a giantess! And she's much too free with those slaps.* Humor moved in him and he chuckled.

As the big oak gatehouse door swung wide, he was beside her, aware that she would not look at him. Her shoulders kept moving in tiny shrugs as if to tell him she'd have been rid of him long before now if it were up to her. In an icy silence she moved past an old retainer who bobbed his white head to them both.

When she dropped the reins of the bay mare to the ground in the forecourt, Michael released the big gray. She acts as if she owns the place, he told himself glumly, eying the high windows and oriels, the neat shrubbery that lined the flaggings of the yard. Again that sense of being trapped took hold of him.

Neither did he find security in the manner in which she opened the hallway door and stood aside for him to enter, head high and still not looking at him. She gives herself the airs of a fine lady! Well, Michael Goddard knew ways to reduce the hoity-toityness of a serving wench.

They were alone in the wide, dim hall. Their footfalls made echoes sound with a mournful cadence. Michael eyed old battle standards and crossed axes on ancient shields and a long refectory table that had been carved in the days of Henry V. A long time ago this had been a small country fortress, he guessed. Successive generations had added wings and oak wainscoting and removed the old donjon.

Meg was waiting at the arched door into the great hall; still as hoity-toity as ever, staring off past his shoulder, making much of her patience with his curiosity. Michael smiled to himself as he approached.

Before she could move his arm was around her waist, swinging her off her feet, lifting her inside the long hall. His heel kicked shut the door as his lips found her waiting, startled mouth.

"Now, mistress fancy airs! It's true I'm only a ship's captain—unemployed for the nonce!—but you're no better than a serving maid." He kissed her again, and whispered into her lips, "I find you most beguiling, most wondrous soft and warm in my arms, and your lips were made to fit my own."

He proved this a number of times, ignoring the little fists that beat at his wide shoulders, crushing her into submission. At last, when she found the fire of his embrace too much to fight, she melted against him from knees to bosom. There was a tiny whimper in her throat as she returned his kisses avidly, arching to the hands that searched her clothing.

"You've thrown in your lot with mine for better or worse, Meg darling. Twice you've slapped me. Once—perhaps—you had cause. I'm not a man who takes kindly to warlike females. I've my own way of dealing with 'em. Like this. And this!"

"Ohhh!" cried Mistress Meg when she could.

For a little while after that she could not talk and found her breathing coming faster and faster. His hands were on the linen of her undersmock, then on the brown wool of her skirt. His hands were here and then another place, so that even if she had a second pair of hands, she could not have fought him off. Strangely, Meg was discovering that she did not want to fight too much. It was very pleasant being kissed to breathlessness and caressed until she trembled in every limb.

A voice cried out suddenly, "Aye, kiss her again and again, the jadel Kiss her into being a human being and not a meddling busybody!"

Michael broke away from Meg, whirling to stare at a woman in a red wig and French farthingale gown covered with seed pearls who stood leaning on an ivory cane before a tremendous wall tapestry. A rebato stood out behind her head and her fan-shaped ruff was thick with Chantilly lace. She wore a jeweled comb in her bright red hair.

"Aye, Meg! I said for him to kiss you. It does my heart good to see you in a man's arms at last, you minx. And not



fighting, I mind. Or at best, just enough to tease him into further deviltries, eh?"

Michael stood frozen. He knew this woman as he knew the reflection of his face in pond water. It was her hand that had signed the warrant for his arrest, her men who were galloping across the Hampshire downs to run him down, even now. Those sharp eyes, the slimly aristocratic nose, the thin mouth; he knew them well.

Meg was curtsying low, saying, "I've found the man you need, Your Majesty. His name is Michael——"

Your Majesty. Yes!

This woman in the red wig was Bess herself.  
Queen Elizabeth of England.

## Chapter Eight

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MICHAEL WENT to a knee before this woman who was England and kissed the hand she extended. A rising excitement was gathering under his doublet. Elizabeth was his avowed enemy yet she stood unconcernedly before him, smiling almost roguishly. Suddenly she laughed and gestured with heavily ringed fingers.

"Come, sirrah! Stand up and let's have a look at you. Ah, that's better. A fine figure of a lad, eh, Meg? Come, girl—no need to blush." She stood back and raked him with a sharp gaze.

She looked him in the eye at last, and Michael found no merriment now in her face but only a cold regality. "You are under interdict, Captain Goddard. As of this moment my officers are out searching the Hampshire countryside for you."

"Yes, Your Majesty," he whispered.

"Meg may have made an enemy of Sir Edmund Morton by rescuing you."

"Rescuing me?"

The Queen glanced at the girl. "How now? Didn't your plan work?"

Meg said, "He'd gotten away by himself when I came to set him free."

Elizabeth tapped her slippered foot in token of her impatience. "Well? Well? I scent a story here. He rescued himself, you say? I like that. 'Swounds! Indeed I do!"

With a hand Her Majesty gathered her full skirt and swept toward a high-backed chair. Seating herself, she beckoned Michael and Meg to a nearby settle.

"Sit together, both of you, and tell me of this adventure.

All of it. Leave nothing out. Not one single jot, you understand?"

Michael waited until Meg was seated before he joined her. He frowned thoughtfully. Where to begin? With his adventures on the high seas? In the prison cellar of Montrose House? Or on that wind-swept rainy evening when he'd rescued the unknown woman in the cloak and furred cowl? No, no. Perhaps it would be best to start with the capture of the *Encarnación* and her conversion into the *Devon Rose*.

Once the Queen interrupted to say, "This Mistress Tryon. She was your intended?"

"Not officially, no. I wasn't the catch her father wanted."

He plunged into his story, reliving the moments of his capture and imprisonment. When he spoke of his knowledge of the coachman's sign language, the Queen nodded abruptly.

"You use your wits. It pleases me."

Meg stared at him, eyes wide, when he told them of his dream beside the roadside ditch. "You were asleep? I thought——"

It was his turn to know surprise. "You thought? I never saw you, only the woman in the furred cowl. Unless——"

"Tell him," snapped Elizabeth. After a little silence the Queen shrugged. "I'll tell him myself. This woman you call Meg, Captain Goddard, is no tavern wench but a duchess of the realm. She's Margaret, Lady Sutton, the Duchess of Sunderland. She's a lady in waiting at my court."

Meg pleaded with her eyes for understanding. Hands twisted together, she whispered, "I was the woman in the furred cowl you rescued in Plymouth, Michael. At the time I thought you a traitor to the Crown, a high member of the Spanish party. Still, there was something in your manner, the appearance you gave of honesty and of speaking the truth, that won me over."

"She makes a good champion," snapped the Queen. "She talked me into giving you a chance to prove you're a loyal Englishman."

Meg smiled faintly. "We knew Lord Edmund Morton kept you prisoner in his town house. We put it under surveillance. Gold loosens servants' tongues. Word reached me that they were going to spirit you away some fine night, out into Surrey.

"I determined to follow you in my coach in order to learn your destination."

"Ah!" Michael leaned forward. "Then it was your coachman I saw use sign language to learn if I were in the coach with Mistress Tryon! I thought it was Morton following us."

"When I learned where you were bound I went on to The Stag, gathered a number of retainers and farm hands and set out to rescue you. I found you asleep. I sent a tinker to guide you to The Stag."

"It was not a dream but reality, as I suspected."

Michael felt the urge to laugh. A duchess! Lord in heaven! The daughter of a rich draper was far enough above his station—but a duchess! And he'd kissed her! Not once but a dozen times. He rose to his feet and bowed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Meg patted the settle, smiling. "Please sit down. I'm not a duchess now."

Michael lifted a three-legged stool. His smile was twisted. "I'd feel more comfortable on this, Your Grace."

In a dull voice he spoke of his meeting with the tinker and his appearance at The Stag. His heart felt as heavy as a lump of lead. Meg—a duchess! Not the tavern maid he suspected, at all. It was a cruel joke to play on him, the last taunt of an insane fate which had had him in its clutches ever since that sea fight with the two Spaniards off Cap François in Hispaniola.

*I don't think I minded any of it, not really—neither my arrest on the Devon Rose by the Dock Watch nor my subsequent imprisonment—as much as I mind this moment of anguish. Before I had hope. Now I have nothing.*

He felt something touch his wrist and looked down. It was the Queen's fan, an ornate semicircle set with pearls and a single ruby. Her face was tender under the paint and powder; he realized he must have been gawking at Mistress Meg with his heart up there in his eyes for Her Majesty to see. Michael flushed.

"My congratulations, Captain," she murmured. "Now I'll tell you why Meg spirited you out of Lord Cavendish's clutches and into my own."

"The Spanish party has become very strong. I find it diffi-



cult to pinpoint its members and its various activities. If I were a man I could ride out into the world and ask questions; even steal Spanish gold they have earmarked for bribes; lay my hands on documents which would hang a thousand of the traitors. I cannot. I'm a woman, and the Queen!"

In her agitation Elizabeth rose to her feet and walked back and forth in the room. The rustle of her petticoats made a sound that almost drowned his muffled heartbeats. He listened to her words with his eyes fixed on Meg's tiny feet and slim ankles showing below her barmaid's skirt. Michael sighed.

"—a sword to strike at treachery, Captain Goddard! A sword to go out into the English countryside and flush these rats from their nests. A single man brave and loyal enough to do as I would do, were I a man!"

The Queen halted before him. There was Arabic perfume on her garments. For an instant he felt the touch of gentle fingers on his yellow poll. "I have no husband, no son, to do these things for me. To ask a courtier to risk his neck—God's blood! What I'd have to promise him. Besides, what courtier do I know who's man enough to fight the entire Spanish party?"

"But you. All I have to do is promise you your life. Isn't that so? To throw the mantle of my protection over you if you fulfill the tasks I set you. Do you understand me, Captain Goddard?"

Michael looked up into the feverishly bright eyes that regarded him. A torrent of eagerness rushed through his veins.

Aye! He understood so well.

He would be her sword, her champion!

In her name he would take to the roads with his sword and pistols and hunt down Lord Cavendish and others of his kind as they had hunted him. All she wanted was proof of their activities for Philip II. With enough proof Elizabeth could act. And when he had succeeded—why, then he would have proved his innocence of the charges against him. He would be free to enjoy the fortune his seamanship had won on the Spanish Main.

Michael remembered the hidden jewels; it was on his tongue tip to speak of them but an ingrained caution advised him to be quiet. This was not the time for their revealment. It would

be better to wait until he stood a free man before the world. The jewels would have less the aspect of a bribe then.

He rose to his feet in answer to a royal command.

"Her Grace will be your confidante, Captain. Work hand in glove with her. Act with her as though she were I. Give her any news you learn, whatsoever papers and documents you may seize in your adventures. Obey her, also. She will have news of the Spanish party, through certain sources." Elizabeth smiled wistfully. "We are not altogether helpless. There are still Englishmen to be found who'll convey a bit of gossip out of a sense of loyalty.

"Now I'll leave you. My coach is at the gatehouse. I'm late for London as it is. Meg, come kiss me. Captain Goddard, my hand."

Elizabeth swept from the room, skirts aswish. Meg went with her. Michael beat a fist into his palm. The destiny which had treated him so cavalierly was giving him a chance at life. His heart lifted in response. Hope made energy wash across his body. He drew the two pistols and relished their weight in his hands.

*I can fight for my rights! And every face I see will be that of Sir Edmund Morton, Lord Cavendish! With sword and pistol ball I'll pull his party down around his ears!*

He sensed rather than heard Meg as she came back into the room. He turned from the high window to regard her, then made a leg to her, bowing low.

"Pray accept my apologies, Your Grace. I'd never have acted as I did except I thought you just a maidservant."

Meg flushed. "Michael, don't be hateful. I'm not a duchess when I'm dressed like this. I'm Meg in my heart and in my mind. I was brought up by Walter Hillard and his dame when my mother died and my father was killed in a hunting accident. They never treated me like nobility. If I didn't behave I caught the palms of their hands across my backside."

She walked closer, eyes steady on his own. "I waited on tables when I was twelve. And I was happy. Happier than I've ever been as a duchess. Until—" White teeth bit her lip. A plea lay buried in her brown eyes. "When Elizabeth heard about me she summoned me to court. I spent three years un-

learning my Hampshire manners and dialect. Many's the time Bess has tried to marry me off. Now I'm glad I never let her."

Michael wondered if Meg could read the pain in his smile. "It won't be the same."

"Why not?"

Honesty made him say, "I could have married Meg. I could never marry the Duchess of Sunderland."

Her eyes fell. "No. I—I suppose not."

Only a step separated them but it seemed to Michael that Meg might as well have been on the moon. Her nobility was as much a bar to him as had been the cellar prison of Montrose House. Even if Meg wanted to renounce her titles in order to become his bride, the Queen could set aside the marriage despite the result of bastardizing any children born to them. She had done it where her court ladies were concerned, many times.

Meg turned her back, moving to the big refectory table, touching its silver candlesticks with quivering fingertips. "Maybe it's better this way. I—I think Meg would have fa-fallen in love with you and been no use at all in the days that lie ahead."

When he did not speak she whispered, "She was a flighty little thing. She'd never have made you a good wife."

"My Meg was an angel from heaven. She gave me the clothes I wear, the food in my middle, even the kisses I'll never forget."

"You stole her kisses."

He smiled sadly. "It's a theft I don't regret."

She stamped her foot. "We waste time talking like this. There's work to be done. Sir Reginald Hardicamp gives a masque ball at his manor house in Middlesex. The Duchess of Sunderland is invited. She may bring a guest. You're to be that guest, Captain."

He frowned. "Isn't it likely I'll be recognized?"

"With a masque covering your features? Dressed like a popinjay in baggy Venetian breeches and mandilion coat? I think not. Besides, I'll introduce you as—as——"

"As Captain Godby, gentleman-adventurer lately back in England from the fighting in the Netherlands. A soldier without a command. The impoverished son of a noble house cut

off by his father for past profligacies. A gamester willing to risk what few shillings he owns at a game of decoy or Irish. Equally willing to fight a duel over a fair lady, and most especially Her Grace of Sunderland, for whom he is smitten with an unrequited ardor."

Laughter made her turn, and now he saw the tears standing in her eyes. "You sound a very hard fellow, Michael."

"It's a role recent events have fitted me for."

"You're bitter."

"Do you blame me?"

She was silent a moment, then shook her head. She whispered, "I wish I could make it different, somehow. It would need a witch like Agnes Sampson to do that. All I'll ask is that you remember your life is very dear to me. Don't take needless risks."

"I don't intend to. Who knows? I might meet Mistress Sampson in my travels and buy a spell from her."

She was walking to the door when he called, "Meg? Wait."

Michael came through the shadows with his heart in his eyes for her to see. He said, "When you go out into the hall, Meg will die inside me. I want to kiss her farewell."

"Oh, Michael. Yes. Oh, yes!"

He tasted tears on her lips.

## ii.

The lutes and viols were playing a lively galliard, an Italian dance now popular in England. From his position to one side of the five musicians Michael saw the Duchess of Sunderland fold her fan and tap her right knee with it. He finished his cup of sherris sack in leisurely manner while admiring the paintings by Hans Holbein the Younger and Isaac Oliver decorating the wainscoted walls of Hardicamp Manor. Overhead a dozen circular candelabra, hung on chains from the high ceiling beams, showered a yellow radiance over gay and colorful doublets, ruffs and farthingales.

It was a pleasant scene but Michael gave it only a cursory glance as he threaded a path between groups of gossipers. Excitement was building inside him. Tonight would mark his



first venture against the Spanish party. He waited only for information from the duchess. The closing of her fan and its tap against a knee had been their prearranged signal.

He was vaguely aware that he was the focal point of more than one pair of eyes as he crossed the floor. Tall and handsome—his mask was of black satin and hid only eyes and temples—he was an intriguing stranger in their midst. The whispered confidences of Lady Sutton were building up and adding to the romantic aura in which he walked as the disinherited son of a noble house, a soldier of fortune lately returned to England with a record of broken hearts and a number of sword duels behind him. Twice, according to the story he and Meg had invented, he had won ten thousand crowns with decoy cards and dice only to fritter them away on beautiful women in Antwerp and Paris.

His ears caught low murmurs as he passed fans hastily lifted to shield gossiping lips. Michael smiled grimly. If they knew the truth!

"They say he's killed nine men. . . ."

"A nobleman's bastard is my guess. One of Cecil's brood. . . ."

"He wagered a hundred crowns on the turn of a single card."

"Captain Godby—he says! It's more likely Dudley."

He went out onto the flagged terrace that was heavy with sweet cicely and honeysuckle in this late springtime. Aware that eyes were watching the wide bay windows, he bent and plucked a flower, twirling it in his fingers as he moved off the terrace steps onto a garden walk. Occasionally he held it to his nostrils.

The duchess was waiting beside a marble fountain, seated demurely with hands clasped in her lap. She was more beautiful than any one woman had a right to be, he thought, aware of his increased pulse. Her white brocade bodice and skirt were covered with gold netting hung with pearls. A golden mask trimmed in white lace with teardrop rubies at either side added an appearance of mystery. The jeweled fan opened at his approach.

"My lady Sutton," he murmured, bowing.

"No one's following you, Michael," she whispered tartly.

"Later when the sherry and claret have done their work the gardens will be filled with lovers. But for now we're alone. There's no need to be so formal."

"Have you learned anything?"

"Nothing that concerns us. There's to be a shipment of gold for delivery in London between midnight and dawn. Old Lord Hartwell boasted of his contribution to it. With it the Spanish party members intend to purchase muskets and powder, daggers and sundry other weapons to be distributed to their retainers against the time of Spanish invasion."

"The gold goes by coach?"

"From Hardicamp Manor before midnight."

"I've less than an hour, then."

Her eyes widened behind the slits of the gold mask. "An hour? Until what? Michael—surely you aren't thinking of stealing an entire coach and four? And how else could you carry so much gold by yourself?"

"That shall be my problem."

"Michael—no! I forbid it. The Queen means for you to take risks in her behalf, but this is madness. The coach will be heavily guarded, possibly by ten to twenty men."

"I'll use desperate measures," he promised.

Her hand touched his, caught and clung. She whispered, "Please? You promised Elizabeth you'd obey me."

"And I shall, as Michael Goddard. But this Captain Godby is a plaguey stubborn fellow. Reckless, too, I find. He laughs at odds. Remember, he's a gambler. No venture, no gain. And so I think our gentleman-adventurer will make his try for that gold, milady Sutton. Just how, I don't know."

"You may be killed!"

"Captain Godby is reckless but not a fool. I'll be as careful as if I walked on eggs."

She considered him a moment, head tilted sideways. There was a new air about Michael Goddard she was at a loss to understand. Deviltry glinted at her from the eyes she could see behind the domino slits. An almost taunting smile sat on his firm mouth. Remembering the crush of his arms about her, she was not entirely unprepared for the kiss he pressed now to her bared shoulder. Flirtatiously she writhed away from the reach of those lips toward her soft throat.

"La, Captain," she laughed. "How impetuous we have become of a sudden."

"A mask is as good as a new face, I find. I'm not Michael Goddard at all, but someone entirely different and far more daring. A man who finds you devilish beautiful."

Her eyes mocked him. "At a time like this can you think of beauty?"

"Of your beauty—yes!"

She would have evaded his hands but they were at her waist and turning her toward him before she could take a single step. His mouth caught her breath as it did her lips. In the white brocade bodice her bosom stormed fitfully. It was pleasant to be held firmly and authoritatively, given neither chance nor opportunity to struggle free. His kiss was something built of fire and delight, and for a little while her senses swam in some lost Elysium of spirit.

When she could she whispered, "You have less than—an hour to be on the highroad. Will you—spend it making love to me?"

"How else would you have me spend it? Drinking claret in the music room?"

"But this is—so prodigal of time!"

"And wonderful!"

"Oh, yes!"

For a little while they talked and whispered as lovers will do; at last, and reluctantly, Lady Margaret pushed him away and directed his attention to the globular Henlein watch she carried at her waist. Covering her palms with kisses, he walked with her toward a trimmed yew hedge; he stood a moment devouring her with his eyes, then whirled and vanished along a little garden walk.

It was a warm spring evening. The stables lay to the west, beyond the small lake which once had been the moat. Half a hundred carriages and coaches were grouped beneath the trees; their drivers and coachmen were congregated at the kitchen doors for beer and cheese. Michael found his gray and mounted; toed the animal along a graveled bridle path which circled the estate grounds and opened out onto the Dunstable to London highroad.

He rode in leisurely manner, knowing the coach bearing

the Spanish party gold would have to come this way; by traveling ahead of it, he would not give the appearance of pursuit.

An hour after midnight he walked the gray off the road and into the dense underbrush and shrubbery of bluebell and periwinkle. The coach was a mile behind him. He had verified this by occasional glances as he came to a high point in the road. Time now to let them take the lead. He must be guided by their actions, for he had no fixed method of attack in mind. Indeed, he admitted ruefully, his words to Lady Margaret Sutton in the Hardicamp Manor gardens had been all pride and no plan.

"I haven't the faintest idea how I'm going to steal that gold. Or even if I can." The sight of the twenty musketeers riding guard as the big coach creaked past his hiding place made him frown anxiously. Twenty-to-one odds were more than he'd counted on.

*A dozen men could not wrest that gold away. How can I accomplish it by myself?*

He cantered through the night in a welter of despair. A bold attack would be foolhardy. He would be killed before he could fire both pistols. A trap? To lay a trap required time and preparation. He rode alone, a single man on horseback, with neither equipment nor time for such a task.

Chance alone would afford him the opportunity. Even then he must be swift and efficient; one mistake could cost his life. Michael rode brooding in the saddle, glancing from the rattling coach to the eastern horizon, dreading the coming of the sun.

Near Watford the heavy carriage began to slow. There was much talking back and forth. Michael could hear snatches of laughter floating on the night wind. After a brief discussion the coachman swung his horses to the left at a fork in the highway and disappeared under the overhanging branches of the huge elms bordering a narrow road.

As he drew near Michael could see an ancient gallows, noose empty and swaying in the breeze. He thought: Where have they gone? Can they have discovered me and taken a shorter route? Or having seen me and grown suspicious, did



they turn aside to lay in wait themselves? He nibbled anxiously at a lip.

After a moment he shrugged. "The prize is to the daring," he muttered, and toed the gray to a canter. He rode with pistol in hand, vowing that if he were ambushed he'd take at least one of his attackers with him.

A mile along the rutted road he saw the coach pulled in close to a rail fence. There was a drayman's cart beside it and a farm wagon piled with straw, together with a private coach of the kind called whirlicote and a number of saddle horses tethered to stakes. Beyond a stone well was a large, low inn with thatched roof and walls of plaster and oak timbering. Its windows were alive with candlelight.

Michael chuckled as he swung down from the saddle. "I'll wager a gold angel to a ha'penny bit this place is a smugglers' cove for the Spanish party hereabouts. It's far enough off the traveled road to escape detection, Lord knows, and is half hidden by its trees."

A man might ride past the ancient gallows a hundred times a day without suspecting the presence of this tavern. Michael reined his horse to a tree branch and moved forward quietly between the shadows.

Standing beside the carriage was the coachman, nose buried in a big pewter tankard. He stood alone, smacking his lips and then wiping a sleeve across his mouth. He looked at the inn and at the sky, drawing a deep breath before taking another swallow. Michael grinned to himself. This was the chance he asked of fate.

Michael staggered, reeling forward. He hiccuped gravely and appeared to come out of a drunken trance in vast surprise at seeing the coachman with a tankard in his hand. Smiling foolishly, he reached for the big mug.

"Serving in th' yard now," he mumbled, nodding approval. "S' wonderful idea, eh? Save time, footsteps. Drink more tha' way."

The coachman drew back in alarm. "Get your own cup," he growled. "In the inn. You beant going to take mine."

Michael stared owlshly. "Ah, of coursel Payment. Got to pay for it. Naturally. Sorry. Sq sorry."

His hands fumbled at his belt, lifting a leather purse. A

moment he swayed back and forth while the coachman stared. An instant later the purse fell from his hands, landing flatly so that a dozen gold coins rolled on the grass. They flashed brightly in the light from the tavern. The coachman stared at them, mouth hanging open; of a sudden his face grew shrewd and sly.

With a laugh he thrust the tankard into Michael's hands. "I'll pick 'em up, milord. No sense you going to that bother."

"Ah," said Michael with a nod. "Smart man. Smart man."

As the coachman bent, Michael swung the tankard. It hit the back of his head with a dull thud. The pewter bent and cold beer splashed. The coachman fell and did not move.

Michael was at the coach door, twisting the handle, reaching into the dark interior to catch hold of a small ironbound chest. There were four others, he saw, grunting as he slid the coffer toward the coach steps. He wriggled the casket onto a shoulder. Bent under its weight, he moved to the farm wagon and dropped the coffer onto thick, dry straw. The straw absorbed the sound of its fall.

Instantly he was at the coach again, reaching for another coffer. He dared look neither at the inn nor at the coachman. If the guards chanced on him now, he would be killed. It was that simple. *Ah, but give me five precious minutes! Only five. No more! Why, then I'll be away and lost—and catch me you who can!* His heart pumped in mad rhythm as sweat stood out on his brow.

The fifth and last coffer seemed to weigh twice the others. He almost fell as he eased it off his aching shoulder and into the straw of the farm cart. He patted it, then swung up over the tailgate and stepped to the low driver's seat. Reins in hand, he clucked softly to the big draft horse. The left off-wheel squeaked protestingly as the wagon lurched and moved; Michael cursed all lazy farmers who would not oil their hubs, but he began to breathe again when the wagon was under way. The wheel did not protest so much while turning.

Michael tied the gray to the tailgate, then chirped the horse to a faster walk. He moved eastward along the rutted road away from the empty gallows and the highway. The

further he went the narrower became the road until it was little more than a wide path.

"I have to find a burying place soon," he murmured. "They'll scour the countryside until they find me or the wagon."

If worst came to worst, he'd fling the caskets into the underbrush and abandon the wagon. In that way—

He reined in, seeing the glint of starlight on water. "A pond. I couldn't have asked for better luck."

Standing on the bank, he lowered the coffers one after another into the water. When he was done he went back and smoothed out the impressions his feet had made in the dirt. He had been especially careful not to break a twig or a single leaf of the ferns that grew here in abundance.

Satisfied, he chirped the farm horse to a lumbering trot.

It was fully thirty minutes later when he heard voices behind him and the rasped curses of angry, frightened men. Cavendish would suspect them of being the thieves, Michael thought, and laughed. It was a matter of seconds to swing from the wagon seat into the saddle and gallop the mare across a meadow and over a stone fence. He disappeared in a stand of beech trees.

As he rode, he told himself he had been lucky this night. From now on he'd spend more time studying the nature of the ground where his robberies and attacks were to take place. Also he must learn the temperaments of the men with whom he had to deal. No longer could he gamble on the greed of a coachman or the thirst that burned the throats of twenty guardsmen.

In the future, he would be prepared.

## Chapter Nine

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SIR ANDREW MATTINGLY passed trembling fingers across his eyes. Weariness was an ache at the base of his skull. He placed his quill pen in its holder and squinted to read the figures and names he'd set down in the ledger book in his neat handwriting. A shadow moved along the far wall. Sir Andrew glanced at it casually, then felt his eyes sharpen. He whirled in his high-backed chair, heart thudding wildly.

"Henrietta," he said with relief, sinking back. "You gave me a start, girl."

Henrietta Hoxton moved into the study with a faint wriggle of hips and a teasing smile. In her neat maid's livery of coarse lockram blouse and woolen skirt and bodice she made a pretty picture. At least so the handsome gentleman had assured her two nights ago at the Sign of the Spotted Heifer where she'd gone for a sip of ale:

"So pretty a picture, Lord Mattingly is unable to resist you, I'll warrant," he had smiled, drawing her down onto the bench where he sat.

Henrietta had tossed her head at that. She was a good girl, she assured him, not one to try and better her station in her employer's bed. He was very apologetic. He did not mean to insult her. On the contrary, he wanted her to believe that it was only because of her good looks he dared make the assertion at all. If *he* were Sir Andrew Mattingly he would never be able to resist her charms. Henrietta giggled. He was a handsome one, no mistake. Military perhaps, to judge by his erect posture and the jaunty manner in which he wore cloak and jackboots and that long sword.

She allowed him to buy her more ale than she would have taken; it was pleasant in his company, for he never tried to



pinch or stroke her. He made her laugh with witticisms and consented three times to dance the galliard in a little alcove. He insisted on walking her home afterward, too. In the shadows he kissed her as Henrietta Hoxton had never been kissed in all her life.

Breathlessly she listened to his sly talk while he forced five gold crowns into her palm. "A wager only. Five gold crowns you cannot slip into Sir Andrew's bed before the end of the week."

"Who wants to slip into his bed?" she asked with a giggle, pressing closer. The ale was stronger than she'd thought; she felt somewhat maudlin walking through the early summer night with this fine gentleman. If he wanted her to slip into his bed now: she might give *that* some serious thought.

The man had sighed and chuckled. "There's nothing I'd like better, my dear. But there's the matter of my bet with—"

He broke off and would not speak until she cajoled him with her arms about his neck and her thighs pressing tight against his own. "Well, then, if you insist. Sir Andrew wagered fifty crowns he was a paragon of virtue—"

"Him? With his doxies coming to the house on my nights off? I've seen them with my own eyes!"

"Ah, you see? He makes a fool of me. He claims to be able to resist the charms of any woman alive."

"Does he, now?" asked Henrietta softly.

The booted gentleman spread his hands. "If I hadn't already seen how beautiful you are, coming and going from the Spotted Heifer, I'd never have made the bet with him."

"Fifty crowns," she breathed.

"It isn't the money," he shrugged carelessly. "You can have that. It's just that I don't like to be made a fool of by Sir Andrew."

"Oh no. I wouldn't want that either. Fifty crowns, I think you said?"

"It's all yours if you can tempt him between the sheets, dear lass. I'm jealous, damn my eyes! But my pride—"

A soft palm covered his mouth. "You're a very bad man, you know. My virtue isn't for sale. Not at all. And yet fifty crowns is such an awful lot of money . . ."

"Sir Andrew sits up late of nights writing in a book, doesn't he?"

"Oh yes. And drinks Canary all the while."

"He'll be properly fuddled at midnight."

She giggled and leaned into the circle of his arms. "Amorous, too. Many's the time I've caught him trying to look under my blouse at what I carry there."

"The lying dog. To tell me he was virtuous!"

They continued their walk, whispering and giggling, until Henrietta Hoxton agreed that for fifty gold crowns it would be worth her while to become a temptation to her employer. As if to discover for himself the delights that were soon to belong to Sir Andrew, the gentleman searched her bodice linens for her breasts, finding them full and heavy, and among her several petticoats to sample the smoothness of her thighs.

"I vow, sirrah," Henrietta panted, "you'll have me eager for this fray—fifty crowns or not!"

"If it weren't for my pride—"

"Nay, now. Please. You must let me go . . ."

"One more kiss!"

"Yes, then. Here!"

Henrietta clung so leechlike to her handsome friend that he had to put her into the recessed servants' doorway almost by main strength. She whispered, "How can you know I'll do what you ask?"

"Unbar a study window. I'll find some way to enter and listen awhile."

"I'm shameless, yet I agree. The night after next will find him in his study. He always writes there just before the Sabbath. My own room is down the stairs close by the kitchen along the lower hall."

She wanted to beg him to go there and wait for her, but somehow the words were frozen on her tongue and by the time they thawed he was halfway down the street, lost among the shadows. . . .

As she minced forward now with a tray that held a bottle of Canary and a glass she told herself it would not be too difficult to earn those fifty crowns. Sir Andrew was in his middle forties but he was a hale man and not unhandsome despite somewhat drooping eyes. Those eyes were regarding

her bulging blouse as she bent to place the tray atop the study desk.

"Milord," she smiled and curtsied, bending deeply.

She heard his indrawn breath and smiled to herself. Show any man a bit of rounded flesh and he becomes all animall. She anticipated the hand that caught her wrist and drew her up against him.

"Stab me! You're a cuddly bit, Henrietta!"

"Milord—please!"

She begged with her lips but her eyes laughed, and in trying to escape she allowed her breast to press against his hand. He followed her as she twisted free and ran. Around the room he chased her until he became aware that her feet grew laggard and that she laughed more giddily. Sir Andrew cornered his maid before a leaded glass window. As he kissed her, she leaned backward; teasingly, he thought; actually she was engaged in opening the window lock.

"Milord, I cannot resist!" she whispered.

"A pox! I should hope not. You've struggled enough to satisfy your virtue and rouse the conquering male in me. Come along now, like a good girl."

"To your bedroom, Sir Andrew?"

He stared a moment. "Where else?"

They moved from the room with their arms about each other. As they reached the door, half her bodice lacings were undone. To her surprise, Henrietta had not needed the three goblets of claret she'd gulped in the kitchen before carrying the wine tray upstairs. Sir Andrew had a way about him.

For several minutes longer Michael crouched in the yew bushes below the study window before swinging a hand to the stone coping and pulling himself upward and into the room. The window had been unbarred. His way was open. Good girl, that Henrietta! She more than deserved the money he was going to leave on her bedspread belowstairs. He regretted the fact that he could not accept her invitation to share the bed as well.

Michael was discovering that Captain Godby was continually shocking Captain Goddard. The easy way he'd grown to know Henrietta and the casual manner in which he petted and kissed her revealed an unsuspected streak of the libertine

in him. Gossip at the Sign of the Spotted Heifer had taught him her name, some weeks before. He learned when she came for her tippie, that she had no male friends, and that she talked freely enough of the Mattingly household. Shamelessly eavesdropping, he became acquainted with the fact that Sir Andrew kept a ledger book into which he dipped his quill pen at regular intervals.

Lady Margaret had told him the name and apprised him of the fact that Sir Andrew was suspected of being London secretary of the Spanish party. The rest he'd uncovered on his own.

He bent above the study desk, smiling grimly. In his haste and desire for his shapely maidservant, Sir Andrew had forgotten all about his precious ledger. But then, in his own home and at this hour of the night, why should he prove suspicious? Michael saw that the names and figures written here were in some sort of code. The discovery appreciably lessened the satisfaction he had known short moments before.

With a hand he swept up the ledger and tucked it into his belt. He moved along the hall, pausing a moment to listen with held breath—and jealousy?—to the sounds coming from his lordship's bedchamber. His hand fumbled for the purse of coins as he ran down the stair. Opening the door to the tiny bedroom, he placed the purse gently on the pillow, then moved quietly toward the rear entrance.

Henrietta was the only servant in the house this night. Usually Sir Andrew sent them packing on the nights he wrote in his ledger; all but one, retained to serve his wine. Henrietta had assured him he would meet no one as he opened the door. Tonight was no exception. The street lay empty before him. He closed the door very gently and began to walk.

## *ii.*

On a late summer night when the harebell made a blue sea across the leas of Wiltshire, a masked horseman held up a coach in which Sir John Pentworth was riding. He ordered Sir John from the coach at pistol point and sent the coach on without him. For an hour the masked man spoke with Sir



John. In the course of their conversation Sir John received a broken nose, suffered, he explained to his friends, when he foolishly made a try for the horse pistol in the highwayman's hand.

Sir John was understandably reluctant to speak further about their talk by the light of a crescent moon on Salisbury Plain. It was enough, he muttered, that he found himself fifty guineas poorer and suffering the pain of a shattered nose. However, it was noted that Sir John was rarely seen about his usual haunts from that night on; it became a rumor and then proven fact that he had retired to his family estates in Cornwall.

From this night on the masked horseman began to travel the length and breadth of southern England. Two Spanish party members who had arranged the murder of a merchant known to be loyal to Queen Bess were hunted down and killed in duels in early October. Winter snows lay on the ground when a member of Parliament was robbed of secret documents he carried in the bottom of his traveling case. No one but the member of Parliament himself knew of that secret compartment, or so he thought; he would have been amazed to learn his shapely wife spied on him of nights when he worked late in his bedchamber. He would have been further amazed to think his pretty Eleanor looked to a handsome gentleman in jackboots and swirling cape for the romance her husband thought to be such nonsense.

Once when he was cornered by five street bullies in the common room of an Ipswich inn on a stormy January night the masked horseman identified himself as "A certain Captain Seadog, my buckos! Now catch me if you can." The street bullies could not catch him; one of them swore he saw fire spout from his lips as he spoke. It was obvious they'd had a brush with Satan himself, he maintained.

The more serious-thinking members of the Spanish party had harsh things to say about Queen Bess, but none of them considered for a moment that the Devil would come up out of hell-fire to fight duels for her. No, no. Whoever this masked horseman was—highwayman or soldier, nobleman or commoner—he was a human being and therefore mortal.

"Find him," ordered Sir Edmund Morton. "And when you find him, kill him."

It was not easy to find him. His gray horse might appear like a marsh phantom galloping a lonely fenland road or a black silhouette outlined against the Exmoor moon. Men heard the drum of pounding hooves moving past the ancient menhirs of Stonehenge or thundering across Ashbourne bridge without seeing man or animal. He was known to have confronted a victim in a Midlands farmhouse and also to have fought a duel with an informer under the shadow of the old Roman wall.

He was on moor and marsh, fen and downs country with pistol barking and sword glinting red with blood. His laughter was harsh and mocking. It seemed he hated the men he fought, yet was kind enough to whatever women might become involved with him. No will-o'-the-wisp was ever half as elusive.

No man can kill that which he cannot find.

### iii.

Summer warmth grew lushly from a damp spring.

Philip II of Spain was gathering the largest fleet ever seen in the Christian world, in Lisbon dockyards. Common gossip said England was to be their target. Sir Francis Drake was raiding Spanish shipping in the *Elizabeth Bonaventure* and making himself feared and hated by every man, woman and child who swore allegiance to Castile and Aragon. He sailed boldly into Cadiz harbor and out again. In June he captured the *San Felipe*, the Spanish King's own ship, laden to its bulwarks with jewels and treasure.

Spain had hoped to float its Armada in September 1587. The Cantabrico shipyards hummed with activity. Ship after ship was made ready. Then it was discovered that its sea-going vessels, returning to the rendezvous, were in no fit shape to go fighting and must be repaired. Philip II fumed and cursed at a malicious fate. Summer faded into a russet autumn.

Captain Seadog was seen in Epping Forest on a Monday

evening, on Rombalds Moor on Thursday. By Sunday he might be somewhere in the fen country of Lincoln or crossing swords with a Spanish party member in a London alley. He rode a gray horse and he wore a mask. He could fight like a devil—or a saint, depending on the temperament of the man who'd witnessed his latest exploit—and was more than passably handsome, which made him attractive to womenfolk.

Sir Edmund Morton raged ineffectually. "If it weren't for the fact that much of Sir Andrew Mattingly's ledger was written in code, we'd all be hanging from the Tower gallows. I'm convinced the same man who stole that ledger also frightened poor Lady Ashford nearly out of her wits this past September."

Hugh Richard Ashford, Earl of Harlow, was a member of the Spanish party. Every third week a number of its adherents came to his manor house in Bedford for a state dinner and a discussion of the great fleet Spain was gathering for an attack on England. On this particular September night there was an uninvited guest, later proved to be Captain Seadog. He was flushed from his hiding place in a bedchamber closet by a favorite hunting hound and chased up among the rooftop chimneys by the earl's armed lackeys.

A monster bonfire was lighted in the courtyard to give greater visibility to the searchers. With a great cry Captain Seadog was seen to leap from a leaded roof gable into the very heart of that fire. It was this sight which made Lady Ashford faint with horror.

When the fire burned itself out next morning there was nothing to be found of Captain Seadog except some brass buttons that had been on his doublet sleeves, and his charred jackboots. Lord Ashford swore this was proof he was the Devil. Lord Cavendish adopted a more temperate view.

"It proves he's the slyest rogue in England," he growled. "I'll wager he stripped himself and filled his clothes with straw. Then he threw 'em into the fire. He knew the search would end when he was seen to leap from the roof. After the castle was asleep it was a simple matter for him to slip into the forest and mount his horse. My bet is he'll strike again before the week is out."

And he did, in Hereford.

A month after the event, Lord Ashford discovered that an expensive doublet and trunk hose of imported maroon velvet were missing from a storage closet. He accepted the loss with philosophic grace, knowing it might have been worse. Had Captain Seadog learned what he came to learn that night, Lord Ashford might have lost his head.

Lord Cavendish sent for Charles Calverly.

"Men say you're the finest blade in England," he told the lean, grizzled man who faced him across a wooden tabletop at the Three 'Tuns tavern in Newgate. It was a little after eleven in the morning and the proper hour for gentlemen to dine. Already the big common room was crowded to overflowing.

Calverly smiled tautly. A scar across the lower half of his right cheek made him seem to be eternally smiling, but anyone who took the trouble to look into his eyes would see the hate that gnawed through his body. A fifth son of a rich baron, he had sold whatever claim that might be his to the lands and properties of the title. A series of hunting accidents and sick-bed cases removed his four older brothers. Now he found himself a baron of the realm and penniless. Rumor said he owned a number of brothels just off Paul's Walk in the London slums. Another rumor said he lost whatever rents his holdings gave him over dice and playing cards in the fashionable gaming rooms of the larger inns and public houses. The fact remained that he was a pauper.

Lord Cavendish studied the patches on his doublet and sighed, "Five thousand guineas are yours if you rid me of this Captain Seadog. One man has as good a chance to catch him as a dozen, especially a man who can use a sword as you do."

Calverly frowned. He was familiar with the name and with its reputation. He protested, "The man's inhuman. At night he gallops over the Derbyshire peat bogs. At dawn he's seen on Yorkshire moors. How can I catch a will-o'-the-wisp like that?"

Lord Cavendish laughed. "And occasionally he comes to London Town. If any man were to come to London and you

not know of it, it would be a strange thing from what I've heard."

"In London, yes. I have my army of rogues and slitpurses. There's little goes on they don't have ways of learning."

Sir Edmund Morton hunched closer, a look of interest on his face. "Is it true what they say, that these clapperclaws have a nobility of their own? That they speak their own language?"

"These are great days of thievery, I will admit," chuckled Calverly. "You can find rogues on every highroad, in every hamlet, even under your very feet in London Town. Cheats and knaves every last one of them. Autem morts, walking morts, plain and fancy harlots, ring fallers and a hundred other kinds. The strange part is that they find the gulls to make their life profitable: credulous persons who ought not to be allowed out for fear of having their very breeches stolen from them.

"Yes, they have their nobility. I'm like a captain of soldiers among them and hold the rank—if I may call it that—of Upright Man. There's also a Curtall whose word is law and a Patriarch Co who marries them. I suppose you'd call them a society within society. At any rate they exist, and are more numerous than you'd suppose."

Sir Edmund beckoned to a serving maid and ordered two stoups of ale with sausage and bread, salad herbs and steamed turnips. He leaned elbows on the tabletop. "In a word, then, you have a small army of spies to send out searching for Captain Seadog?"

"At a price of five thousand guineas, yes."

"When you find him will you be able to kill him?"

Calverly said quietly, "I've never met my equal yet with cold steel. I fancy this Seadog to be some courtier anxious to make a name for himself. However, I won't hold him lightly. If I find him he's as good as dead, believe me."

Calverly held out his hand with a grim smile. "I'll set my bullyboys and doxies to work at once, Morton. I'll need a fifth of the price now, to seal the bargain."

"And you'll get it, after we sup and drink. You'll come along with me to Montrose House. But forget business for the nonce—here comes the ale."



Charles Calverly was an essentially bitter man. He drank to forget rather than to enjoy. When he took a woman it was in the spirit of hate for himself and for his lean, strong body that needed woman-flesh as a sedative. He aimed low because to aim high meant that he thought well of himself, which he did not. The drabs of Paul's Walk and Billingsgate were seductive enough to suit his taste. All he asked was that they be clean and reasonably attractive.

He sat on a stool and at a table whose scarred surface and mended legs showed the rigors of its past. Placed in piles before him were hundreds of golden crowns and silver shillings. His hands went from one pile to the next, moving them about as if they were draughts in a game of ticktack. A curious smile twisted his mouth into a lopsided grin.

"My luck's changing, Moll," he said to the young woman seated across from him. "A fortnight ago Sir Edmund gave me a thousand crowns. I've played at cards since then until I'm blue in the face. But I won. I won, Moll!"

"Aye," the woman whispered greedily.

Calverly smiled and pushed a stack of shillings toward her. "Put 'em in your kerchief. You're a good girl as girls around here go." His voice sharpened. "Heard anything of this Captain Seadog?"

"Nothing, Charles." Her hands toyed with the coins before she swept them into the basket she made of a dirty kerchief. Opening the bodice of the coarse woolen dress which was her only covering, she tucked it between her breasts so that it was supported by the tight belt at her waist.

"The man's not human," he complained. "He's always moving. I don't think he ever rests."

Moll smiled crookedly. "He's smart. Either that or there's more than one of him."

Calverly opened his eyes wide. "The devil you say! I wonder if his lordship ever considered that?" He chuckled cynically. "Let's hope there are more than one. It lessens the task I've set myself. I—"

His hand went up. He turned toward the stairway door at the sound of stealthy footsteps. A moment later the door swung inward and a girl, scarcely more than a child, came in on bare, grimy feet.

"I saw'm, Sir Charles. At the White Hart Inn in Bishops-gate."

Calverly pushed back from the table. "Are you sure, Kate?"

The little head bobbed. "He wore fancy clothes, sort of reddish, with fine jackboots and a maroon cloak. Carried a sword bigger'n I am. And he rode a gray horse."

"Maroon doublet and trunk hose, stolen from Ashford," Calverly muttered. "It could be. It just could be."

Three times in the past fortnight he had ridden out in answer to a description something like this, only to find himself too late to catch his man. Once he'd come upon an elderly traveler who could not possibly be Captain Seadog. His little army of street urchins—the men and boys were cutpurses and thieves, the girls and women out-and-out harlots—had scattered across the face of London Town at his request. He hoped, as he reached for the worn leather baldric that held his sword, that this time they had found the man he hunted.

Well, he would know soon enough. The White Hart was less than a mile away. He would be there in a matter of minutes. His palm clapped Moll on her soft rump. He flipped a shilling to little Kate and gathered up the rest in his leather belt purse.

"Fetch my horse, Kate."

"Yes, Sir Charles," she nodded and ran from the room.

To Moll he said, "If this man really is Seadog, I'll be richer by four thousand gold guineas come nightfall."

"God above!"

"Enough to see me out of these stews and to some clean, country place where I can begin life all over again. I could buy a farm—I was born and raised in Devon, you'll mind—because as I grow older I find a longing in me for the old things. Were you ever on a farm, Moll?"

The woman shook her head. She had not closed her bodice strings, so that as she leaned on the table Calverly could see the inner curvings of her breasts. Her long yellow hair was unkempt and snarled with bits of grease where she wiped her fingers after eating. Moll was a street slut when he'd found her. Now she no longer walked the streets but remained in this little room waiting for his return. Calverly sighed. It might be that Moll would like farm life. At least she'd get a

chance to breathe fresh air occasionally and go swimming in a country pond from time to time.

Tenderness was an unfamiliar emotion to Charles Calverly but at this instant he knew its wistful touch. "We might get married, Moll. I'm not much of a catch, but neither are you. We're the same kind. It might work out."

She blinked. "You'd marry—me?"

"You say you love me, and after my own fashion I suppose I love you." He glanced at the leather purse he still held in a hand. "Here, keep this as proof I mean what I say."

She caught the purse with deft hands and stared down at it, knowing she was going to cry. Moll could not remember the last time she'd cried, but it had been long ago. She watched Charles Calverly step through the stair doorway and heard his feet on the treads, and it seemed as if each footfall echoed in her heart.

Calverly came out onto the narrow alleyway and stared about him with curious eyes. A woman leaned from a window some houses down to toss a pail of slops onto the cobblestones. Two men snored drunkenly in a gutter on the other side of the street. Close by the corner he watched two girls soliciting a passing merchant. He grimaced and wondered how men could so lower themselves to the animal level.

His chuckle was harsh. "I'm a fine one to think that. I've been lower than the lowest. But at least my luck's changing now. To win at Irish and decoy in the same week's a harbinger of better things to come."

As Kate approached with the big bay horse he thought, I'd like to take them all with me, all these poor children forced to steal or worse to stay alive! Despair touched him briefly.

"Kate, I've one more task for you. You know Montrose House? The one I showed you a few nights ago in case you had to go there with news for me? You remember? Good. It's time to pay Montrose House a visit with the message I give you. You're to ask for Sir Edmund and tell him his hired sword has flushed the quarry at the White Hart. Tell him when he comes to bring four thousand guineas."

"His hired sword has flushed the quarry at the White Hart. I'll remember, Sir Charles."

He patted Kate on the cheek and swung up onto his bay

mare, toeing her into a trot. Half a mile along Ludgate Street and then south over Paternoster Row through Corn Hill, and he would be at the White Hart. Calverly told himself that one week from today he and Moll would be in Devon. Confidence filled his veins. He felt as if his new life already had begun.

The White Hart had been built in the reign of Henry III, thirty years after the signing of the Magna Carta. Its wattle and timber bulk was low and rambling, its wings and timbered fronts having been added haphazardly during the years. The vast innyard was flagstoned and served on occasion for the production of a play. An air of carefree jollity hung over its leaded roof and tiled chimneys.

Charles Calverly cantered under the tall wooden gateway into the inn court. He flipped the reins to a linkboy and made his way past a group of giggling maidservants shelling peas and candying flowers by dipping them in sweet syrups. His height and scarred face drew all eyes.

At the long counter in the common room he sipped a tankard of cold Midlands ale. "I'm to meet a gentleman in a maroon doublet and cloak. Have you seen him?"

The counterman looked thoughtful. "I 'aven't but might be Hattie has. Hattie be the upstairs maid for them as wants privacy. Ought I ask 'er, do ee think?"

Calverly pushed three coins across the counter. "Two for you, one for Hattie."

The man was back within moments. "Hattie says she remembers serving such a one upstairs in the room wi' the green door. Ee goes up yon stair and down the gallery past a red door and a blue door, and there ee be."

Calverly nodded. He appeared to be in no hurry, ordering another tankard and leaning an elbow on the counter to stare at the beamed ceiling and wide brick hearth. He finished his second tankard in leisurely fashion, but the counterman noticed that his eyes were always turned in the general direction of the wide staircase. At last he sighed and, settling his baldric more comfortably over a shoulder, made his way toward the stairs.

He found the green door without difficulty. As he lifted his hand to rap he could distinguish the voices of a man and

woman speaking in undertones so low he could not understand them. All conversation ceased as he rapped sharply.

"Who's there?"

"A gentleman to see the captain."

"What captain?"

"He who calls himself—Seadog!"

There was a muffled oath and the thud of boot heels on wooden floor planks. As the door opened inward Charles Calverly found himself confronted by a tall young man in maroon doublet and trunk hose, red cordovan jackboots and a short cape that fell from wide shoulders. Calverly was delighted to see that a long rapier hung at his left hip.

Calverly said agreeably, "I've been sent by certain members of the Spanish party who have grown tired of hearing about the exploits of a fellow naming himself 'Seadog.' I volunteered my services to rid the world of this street ruffian."

The man in the maroon doublet smiled and stepped aside. His hand gestured. "Pray enter. I'm always happy to meet a member of the Spanish party."

There were two women in the room, Calverly saw. One was hidden almost completely beneath the folds of a rich velvet cape; she sat motionless in a high-backed chair, but Calverly was aware of bright eyes staring boldly. The second woman was neither cloaked nor seated. She wore a cloth-of-gold gown and farthingale; her hair was coiffed in curls and set with a jeweled comb. No ordinary wench, this; in all probability she was a court lady.

Calverly bowed graciously and begged forgiveness. "A private matter to be settled between Captain Seadog and myself."

The standing woman arched her brows. "What makes you so positive this man is Captain Seadog?"

"His maroon clothes, madame. The ones he stole from Lord Ashford. And the gray horse he rode to the inn. However"—and he swung back to the quiet man standing with his back to the green door—"if you wish to deny your identity and can prove yourself not to be this Seadog fellow—"

Michael Goddard laughed mirthlessly. "It seems I grow overconfident of my ability to escape detection. It's an error that needs amending. Well?"



"Permit me to introduce myself. I'm Charles Calverly."

One of the women cried out softly. Calverly smiled and turned to her. "I am not altogether unknown, I see. I take pleasure in the fact. You carry a sword, Captain. Shall we test the quality of each other's swordsmanship? I confess you intrigue me. I've never met a man I deemed my equal with the steel, yet you have the reputation of being a very wizard. I'd like to know if reputation in this instance is strict truth."

As he spoke, Calverly was slipping loose his cloak, tossing it over a wainscot chair, unfastening a slashed sleeve to roll it loosely about his forearm. The man in the maroon doublet was removing his own cape, smiling faintly as the beautiful woman in the cloth-of-gold gown and farthingale began arguing with him in a subdued voice, with many gestures.

Then Captain Seadog—Calverly was positive of his man at this point, for he was lean and fit and there was an expression of careless deviltry on his handsome features—went to the green door and bolted it. As he turned back into the room he shook free his rapier and threw the scabbard into a corner. Calverly fell into position. He saw at once that the man facing him was no stranger to a sword. There was a firm positiveness in the touch of his flicking blade, confidence in each movement of his sword arm. The rapiers tapped, feinted, riposted. Only the sharp *tac, tac* of steel on steel and the swift breathing of the watching women could be heard.

Calverly attacked with assurance but found his point turned aside almost with ease. Once a circular parry came near to wrenching his haft from his hand. Three times he assayed a *flanconnade*; three times it was parried into a savage riposte. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Allow me to compliment you, Captain," he gasped, evading a straight thrust. "In your case reputation is the truth. I find you a most excellent swordsman."

Both women were on their feet watching the interplay of those bright blades. The smaller woman showed a lock of auburn hair below the back-thrown cowl of her cloak. There was something plaguey familiar about her sharp features. Calverly wished he could take a long look at her. He was sure he would know that face even shadowed as it was by that cowl. Somewhere, he had seen her before: but where? This

devil in the maroon doublet was pressing him so closely, however, that he had no opportunity to think about anything but the blade that came searching through his defenses.

He parried, parried again. Slowly he fell back.

*The years are telling on me, all the long years of swilling cheap wine and bedding this slut or that, spending sleepless nights over a card table or a dice layout. And I feel each one of those drinks, each fallen card and bouncing mattress, in my muscles! I am not a young man any longer. My arm is tired. My sword is faltering, growing slower and slower . . .*

Calverly did not see the point slipping past his circular bind. There was a sudden flame in his middle. To his vast surprise he saw Captain Seadog extended in the full fury of the lunge. Calverly went back three steps. Weakness came washing across his body in pounding waves. His sword arm was so tired he could not lift it. He looked down at himself, at the widening red stain.

"Why, I'm wounded—"

He fell face down on the floor and lay unmoving. His rapier slipped from his limp fingers and rolled a little, back and forth.

Michael shook himself to action. "Your Majesty, you mustn't be seen in this inn. Quickly—this way. Please follow me."

Elizabeth of England drew her cowl lower about her sharply featured face, sighing gently. For a little while, as those blades had clicked and beat against each other, her blood had been on fire and she had been fully alive. The cares and worries of state left her little chance to share the excitements that life could hold, the excitements which the least of her subjects knew and enjoyed.

"Yes, yes," she whispered. "I'm coming. It wouldn't do for me to be found in the White Hart with one of my ladies in waiting and Captain Seadog, now would it? Who would understand the excuse that I insisted upon Meg's bringing me, that I might hear some of your adventures from your own lips?"

"I did not dare bring you to court but must meet with you clandestinely to learn what you are doing to bring about the downfall of the Spanish party. Ah, well. It's ended now, this little outing of mine. Lead on, Captain."

The hall lay empty. Michael showed the way down the narrow back stair which ran out into the innyard. A coach stood waiting close by the courtyard well. The man and two women hurried across the flagstones, heads bent. Michael held open the coach door. When the Queen extended her ringed hand, he kissed it.

"You've made your name a byword in the kingdom, Captain," she said softly. "I'm not ungrateful. Continue your fine work and we'll have the Spanish party as useless as a broken reed." The smile which was shadowed by the edge of her cowl became very gentle. "Meg tells me you've been collecting your proofs, one by one. When they're in shape to be presented at court, bring them to me."

She moved into the coach and Lady Margaret went with her. Michael watched the coachman snap his whip, saw the coach lumber across the innyard and out onto the street. A ripple of despair went through him. He had done so much these past few months, riding, fighting, slipping from one trap and into another! Suddenly it all seemed useless. He would never succeed in his task.

His feet felt heavy as he walked toward the stables for the gray horse.

## Chapter Ten

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THE RATTLE of dice was loud in the silent room.

The slim man who cast them across the wooden tabletop trembled almost uncontrollably. There was panic in his white face, in his staring eyes. His hands shook as he reached for the small white cubes and held them a moment with his fingers clasped shut. His lips moved as if he whispered prayers.

"Your point is nine, milord," said his opponent.

Edward Lord Kelsey nodded agitatedly. "Damme! I know it, Captain. Just give me a moment to gather my senses."

They were alone in the taproom of the fashionable Blossom's Inn, Lawrence Lane, Cheapside. Dawn was a pinkness in the eastern sky beyond the row of leaded windowpanes that looked out over the wide, flagged yard. A drowsy counter-man nodded beside the wooden tun. From somewhere beyond the wide door an early broom was sweeping out stained rushes.

The dice rattled again, louder.

They thumped across the table planks, rolling wildly. When they came to rest, a four and a three stared upward. Lord Kelsey sagged.

"I'm clean," he whispered hoarsely. "You've won it all."

Michael Goddard reached for the gold crowns resting in twin wooden bowls at the edge of the gaming table. He hefted them a moment, casually. They made a heavy weight in his hands, but it was not the coins that interested him so much as it was the stricken look on the pallid features of young Kelsey.

"Milord, will you be my guest for a last cup of Canary?" he asked gently.

Lord Kelsey laughed cynically. "Since I'm to be your guest, I will. God knows I couldn't afford to stand treat to you."

They roused the counterman and sent him stumbling off for a new bottle. His disappearance gave Michael the opportunity he needed. He lifted the big leather sack at his waist which held the gold crowns and placed it on the counter.

"A pity Lady Luck's so fickle," he commented.

Lord Kelsey drew out a laced kerchief and mopped sweat from his forehead. He was very young, newly down to London Town from his ancestral estates in Derby. "Losing the money's bad enough, but I can stand up to that. It's what Her Ladyship the Marchioness of Mann will say that worries me. God's blood! She may even forbid my marriage!"

The young man seemed on the verge of tears. Michael said softly, "This marriage means a lot to you, I take it?"

"More than life! Isobel Mann and I have been in love since we were ten. Now at last I've gotten her mother to consent—the marchioness is one of the richest women in England and my family one of the poorest, damn my eyes!—this has to happen. I've lost whatever fortune I've been able to amass."

Curiosity made Michael ask, "Why is it so necessary for you to amass a fortune at all? Surely it's the wife who brings the dowry to the husband?"

"And so it is. But the old bitch insisted I match Isobel's dowry coin for coin—two thousand pounds in gold—before she'd agree to let me have her. I mortgaged buildings and leased farm lands to the hilt to raise it. Once married, I intended to pay it back and be free of debt."

"There's a way you can reclaim your money."

The room grew quiet, with only the rattle of a cart trundling over the cobblestones of Lawrence Lane disturbing the silence. Lord Kelsey stared hard at this handsome man in brocade Venetians and cloth-of-gold doublet. He seemed a fop, but his bronzed face and lean height gave him the appearance of a soldier on holiday.

Michael moved the leather sack around the counter so that a few of the yellow coins fell out and drew his companion's eyes. "I don't mean to be insulting but—you can earn back my winnings."

Lord Kelsey licked his lips. "And the price I pay?"



"Information."

The young man opened his eyes very wide. "Information? From me? I'm afraid you've come to the wrong man."

"You're Edward Lord Kelsey of Derbyshire? From Kelsey House?"

"Naturally, but——"

Michael shrugged. "Then you'll be a member of the Spanish party. Two weeks ago you entertained Lord Edmund Morton at your estate, together with sundry other members."

The young nobleman began to shake. The Spanish party was outlawed in England. This calm man across from him was as good as accusing him of being a traitor. He stammered, "I know nothing——"

"We're alone, man. Use your head! No witness lurks to overhear. What I know and what I can prove are two different matters! Simply tell me the name of the person other than Sir Andrew Mattingly who keeps accounts of your membership."

"No. Oh my God—no! It'd be an act of foulest treachery!"

"Why, now, that all depends. Treachery to Elizabeth? Or treachery to Philip? By telling me the name I seek, you prove your loyalty to England."

"My own name is on the accounts. My name and what few shillings I've been able to contribute——"

"You only became a member of the party to aid the Queen, didn't you?"

Lord Kelsey was startled. "Eh? I don't know what— Oh! Ah! I perceive what you drive at. I only joined the party to spy them out, eh?"

"The very insignificance of your personal contributions is a powerful argument for your loyalty. That fact and my word in the Queen's ear may well prove as rewarding as your marriage to Isobel Mann. If there is a marriage now I've won your fortune."

Lord Kelsey wiped his face. "Plague take it! I'm between Scylla and Charybdis."

"Now, don't exercise yourself. It's smooth sailing as I see it. Whisper a name in my ear, take back your two thousand pounds and go marry your Isobel. When Elizabeth learns you played the spy for her she'll prove grateful, I'm sure."

The young man nibbled his lower lip. He said flatly, "All evening long I've wondered who you were. They all call you The Captain. By that they must mean Captain Seadog."

Michael shrugged casually. "You flatter me, sir. No, no. My name is Godby. Captain Michael Godby." He reached for the leather sack and began putting the spilled coins into it, one at a time. Lord Kelsey watched each movement of his fingers with desperate eyes. Michael murmured, "The counter-man will be back soon with the Canary. We'll have no further time for talk."

Lord Kelsey clamped a moist hand about Michael's wrist. He whispered hoarsely, "The name you seek is that of Harriet Ormsley, Viscountess Brampton."

"She keeps a ledger as Sir Andrew did?"

"Yes—a small book with red leather covers, scarce five inches by four. She always carries it with her in a purse."

He gathered up the fallen coins and the leather sack as Michael released his hold. A moment the youthful nobleman paused at the counter, staring wildly at the beamed ceiling and long refectory tables. Then he said, "I'm off to Hartford House. I'll not stay for the Canary."

He was almost running when he reached the door.

Michael waited for the counter-man and the tall leather bottle he brought, slipping a few shillings on the countertop. He carried the bottle toward the narrow stair leading to the second story. Tiredness was a sickness in his middle, for he had come fast from Hampshire yesterday in answer to Meg's hurried summons, and he'd had less than an hour of sleep before hastening to the taproom to strike up a conversation and a casual friendship with Lord Kelsey.

"A young viscount," Meg had told him in an upstairs room of Blossom's Inn, which she named as their meeting place, "come into London to be married. He carries a small fortune. At the moment he's the weakest link in the Spanish party."

She paced back and forth in the small bedchamber, farthingale swinging. Anxiety made tiny wrinkles on her smooth brow as her hands clasped and unclasped nervously.

"The manner of his breaking I'll leave to you, but he must be broken. Lord Kelsey knows every member of the party. If he can be made to talk, if he'll divulge the name of the

person who holds the code to Sir Andrew Mattingly's account book, we'll have the Philip-lovers where we want them!"

Her outstretched hand made a grasping motion.

"What amazes me is how you learn these things," Michael murmured reflectively. "Invariably you come up with the right information at the right time."

Lady Margaret smiled. "Oh, we know the names of most of the party members. It's simple enough to keep tabs on them, where they go and when they meet. But they're sly. What happens when they meet and the sort of proof we need to go before the Queen, they never let us learn. And Elizabeth—though her faith in Sir Edmund Morton is being sorely tried these days—is just stubborn enough to require actual evidence of his treachery.

"Nothing else would cause her to admit she'd made a mistake. If you know anything of queens, my dear Michael, you know how such an admission would gall her.

"As to young Lord Kelsey—it's common knowledge he wants to wed Isobel Mann. The old marchioness stands in his way. He mortgages his lands and collects his monies, then sets out for London. He always makes Blossom's Inn his headquarters when in the city, which is why I selected it for our rendezvous."

"I'm to stand treat, to him, get him to talk, induce him into a go with the dice or a pack of cards, eh?"

"And win!"

It had not been a difficult task at all.

Lord Kelsey had fancied himself a man of the world, fearful of revealing the fact that he was more used to country than to city ways. It was easy to taunt him in a friendly manner so that he insisted he try his luck at the dice. At first Michael let him win, to increase the size of his bets. It was then that Michael brought out the special dice called barred cinque-deuces, which would roll only fives and twos. He used them long enough to take half Lord Kelsey's fortune; by that time the young man was committed to the play; he had to continue in the hope his luck would change or lose his Isobel forever.

There was a bad taste in Michael's mouth. He scorned a cheat, yet if this were the only way he could win freedom and the clearing of his name, he would cheat. Aye, and lie

and steal, if needs be! As he walked he forced out the plug of the leather bottle and drank deep of the warming wine.

Moving into the bedchamber, Michael loosened his doublet and shrugged off his heavy cape. He closed and latched the door. Standing beside the walnut clothes cupboard, he drank again of the Canary.

As he turned toward the bed he saw Meg for the first time. She lay sleeping in the big four-poster with her brown hair spilling across the pillows. She had drawn the covers up to her waist. Michael stared in sheer disbelief.

He was reaching out to shake her awake when he changed his mind. "Let her sleep. God knows if she needs it as much as I she'll not thank me for waking her."

His hands slipped off doublet and hose; wearing only a linen shirt and drawers, he slipped between the coverlets, restraining a sudden hunger to draw her into his arms. If she were anything but a duchess I would, he told himself with a wry grin as his head sank into the pillow. His eyes closed wearily.

When he woke the sun was high in the sky and flooding through the bedchamber window. He stirred and felt soft flesh against his hip. Still somewhat dazed from a dream in which Meg had played at dice with him, wagering an article of clothing for each toss—and losing at every throw—he rose up to an elbow.

Her eyes were open and she smiled at him. "I'm a shameless doxy, Michael Goddard, to lie abed with you like this. Of course I could pretend I'd just waked and rail at you for entering the bed once you'd seen me in it, but I'm honest enough to admit I wouldn't want to be anywhere else at the moment."

The sheet was down to her waist. Through the sheer lace and linen smock that was her sole garment he glimpsed the milkiness of her full breasts and the dark circles of their areolae. A wave of desire swept his veins. He trembled, bending over her waiting mouth. For this moment he had been born; for this moment he had stayed alive, been rescued, fought and killed. His hand moved to touch the slimly ripe body that lay beside his own.

"You aren't the duchess at all," he whispered.

"I'm not?"

"You're Meg the serving wench. We aren't in Blossom's Inn but back at The Stag, and I've paid good silver to get you into my bedchamber."

"Meg never did what some of the other girls did."

"She would have—for me."

The Duchess of Sunderland lifted smooth white arms and placed them about his neck. Her smile was teasing. "Yes, I think she would have, Captain Goddard. Meg loves you."

"And I love my Meg!"

He kissed her, gradually letting her body know the weight of his own. When he would have slipped the smock from her, she held his hands tight within her fingers. Her eyes were very wide and dark, and Michael fancied that he saw fright dawning in them.

"Do you love the duchess as well as Meg, Michael?"

"How could I? I never kissed the Duchess of Sunderland. She's always been so distant on the few times I've met her."

"Lord above! Would you have her play the strumpet?"

His kisses pastured on the smooth perfection of her shoulders. She fought only a very little against the passion sweeping upward from her toes, whispering, "Michael, please—I've never known a man—and my heart hammers so I cannot think. My arms are weak, my very limbs on fire . . ."

He was gentle and tender, and under his guidance Meg felt the tide grow stronger in her blood as wave after wave of utter pleasure caught her in its grip. She cried out softly in delight, many times. There was no thought or care in her other than that this happiness go on and on.

Time became a vast and swelling sea as she gathered Michael into her yearning arms and held him against the fury of her love. Her little cries and his whispered words were winds which blew across the surface of that sea, gently fanning the heaving, rippling waves. She lay rocking, held firmly by his hands.

## ii.

Later, while the afternoon sun painted long shadows in the room, he told her about Edward Lord Kelsey and his coming marriage to Isobel Mann.



"He guessed who I was, easily enough. 'You're Captain Seadog,' he says as if he were seeing a miracle."

"Michael! If he should tell——"

He drew her against him. "Do you think we'd be lying here so much at ease if I thought he'd betray me? No, we're safe enough. I doubt that Lord Kelsey will tell anyone about last night's or this morning's happenings at Blossom's Inn. He's only too happy to forget he ever saw me. How could he explain himself, my dear? By admitting, 'Yes, I talked with Captain Seadog. I even gave him the name of the only person in the whole world who owns the codebook which will unlock the secrets of Sir Andrew Mattingly's ledger?'"

Meg frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right. Still, he may let the secret slip in an unguarded moment. Perhaps he'll hint that Captain Godby and Captain Seadog are one and the same person."

Recklessness made Michael chuckle. "And if he does, so what? I'll simply change my name. But never fret your pretty head about it. Lord Kelsey is even more anxious for silence than we are ourselves. Remember, I promised him a pardon from the Queen for playing the spy. I think he'll keep that in mind as he goes about his affairs in Derbyshire."

"Mmmm, I hope so," Meg said and, throwing back the coverlets, padded naked to the dresser that held her clothes.

Michael rose to an elbow and stared. "Come back, darling. I vow you grow more beautiful every moment!"

She looked over a white shoulder and thrust out her tongue. "Marry, my good fellow. It's time to stir your shanks in another activity. Kelsey may never betray you, but that's no guarantee he won't warn Viscountess Brampton you intend making a try for her codebook."

He swept from the bed to chase her around the room, claspng her against him and kissing her breathless. A moment he held her tight, then clapped a palm to her soft rump. "Get dressed, wench, or suffer the consequence."

"Oh piffle!" said Lady Margaret, but she reached for her garments with unusual haste.

He watched her don the Holland smock and russet petticoat. If only I could have her forever with me like this, to kiss and tousle! The slim white length of a shapely leg as she drew

a stocking taut, the round pressure of her hips in thin linen as she bent to lift a dainty slipper, were like mocking voices in his ears.

*Enjoy this moment and these snatched hours of happiness, Michael Goddard. Once your task is done, if ever it is, you will lose this woman. Meg will disappear forever, and in her place will remain only the Duchess of Sunderland.*

A duchess would never be permitted to wed a sea captain. It was a thought that was always in the back of his mind as he galloped along a fenland road or waited for dawn on the darkness of a barren moor. He rode and fought to prove himself a man loyal to his Queen and England. At the same time all his fighting and riding was costing him the woman he loved.

Fully dressed, Lady Margaret came to press her cheek against his own. The same sadness that was in his heart he could read in her dark eyes.

"I'll go alone, dearest. Wait a little while, then come after me." Her fingers clung, reluctant to release his hand.

"Before the week is out I'll visit the Viscountess Brampton. When I leave her I'll have her account book in my possession. With it and the ledger Sir Andrew kept, we'll have all the proof we need."

"Bring them to me. We'll go together to the Queen and make her a present of them."

They kissed a moment, lips and bodies straining. Then Lady Margaret lowered her veil and swept from the room with a rustle of taffeta petticoat. Michael went to the window and threw back the sash. *Aye, look your fill of her beauty while you can, Michael Goddard. Soon now she'll be no more to you than a poignant memory of past happiness. Bitterness filled his throat and his hand clenched slowly into a fist.*

. iii.

Lord Kelsey passed a scented kerchief across his damp brow as he listened to Sir Edmund Morton curse harshly. Anxiety weakened his legs and made him seek a nearby chair.

"Damme, Edmund! I thought you'd be grateful!" he wailed.

"Grateful? For your betrayal of a trust? Are you mad?"

"I could have kept quiet. No one would've known."

Lord Cavendish eyed him up and down, lips curling with disdain. This is what came of using weak reeds to build the structure of rebellion. His palm slapped the polished top of an oaken table as he whirled away from the sight of this young nobleman to stride up and down on the thick carpet of his book-lined study.

"There's that to be grateful for, I suppose," he said at last. "Grateful, too, that I'm still alive and not kneeling to the headman's ax. Oh yes, I'm grateful enough for those things. But how long can I remain grateful, do you suppose, when this Seadog fellow goes to Lady Brampton and wheedles her account book out of her?"

"I thought you could prevent that. It's why I came to you. My own name's written big on its pages."

"You remember that a little too late."

"'Pon my life, I thought of lying to the fellow. But there's something about his eyes—I can't describe it—"

Cavendish sneered, "You didn't dare lie."

"Exactly! Exactly! I was forced to tell the truth. I had the feeling he'd know if I lied and not give me my money back."

"Kelsey, you're a sniveling infant. Go run to your Isobel. I can't stand the sight of you any longer."

Lord Kelsey rose and discovered his knees to be more rubbery than ever. "Morton, you've got to assure me. God's my life! I can't get married and run off to Derby knowing the Queen's liable to send soldiers to arrest me for high treason and—"

Lord Kelsey found his voice breaking on a sob. He pounded his hands together. "Assure me, Morton!"

Sir Edmund glowered. "I assure you you're an ass, that's what I assure you! How can we stop this Captain Seadog now? He killed Calverly in a duel and Calverly was the finest blade in England."

"Oh my God! I'm done in, I'm done in. I know it!"

"Stop blathering and get out of my sight. I had the beginning of an idea while you were bleating out your story. There's a simple chance I might yet turn victory from defeat."

Lord Kelsey smiled hopefully.

"Seadog knows Viscountess Brampton has her records, right?" asked Morton. "He'll make an attempt to steal from her, right?"

"Morton, don't pause so. Go on!"

Sir Edmund laughed harshly. "We'll let him steal her accounts. Or let him *think* he's stealing them. Eh? While all the while we'll have men waiting to snatch him. His plan to steal her book we'll turn into a trap to catch him!"

"I see it all! We'll snare him, won't we, Edmund?"

"I will. You'll be nowhere around. Else you might wail a warning to him in your nervousness. Go marry your Isobel. Run off to Derbyshire. Leave matters to me from now on." When the viscount was at the doorway, Lord Cavendish said abruptly, "Kelsey, no more gambling. On your neck, no more!"

"No, no, Edmund. Indeed—no more!"

#### iv.

Captain Godby filled his favorite clay pipe with fragrant tobacco. He sat on a length of fallen masonry in the desolate gardens of St. Paul's churchyard with a noonday sun beating on his shoulders. He wore the patched doublet and frayed cloak of a soldier down-at-heels, with his longsword hung from a worn baldric. Since his adventure with Charles Calverly he had forsworn the same garment for more than one appearance. Now he dressed in garb selected from a shilling draper and purchased with a few of the coins he'd stolen from the Spanish party.

He said to the pock-marked man beside him, "You understand what's to be done, Roger?"

Roger Carew extended a glowing taper as Michael bent to take flame into the pipe, puffing slowly. His wide mouth grinned wisely.

"Ar, sir. I understand. I'm to deck myself out in coarse black clothes wi' a mask to cover my face. Where Paternoster Row turns into Newgate Market I'm to wait for a big coach wi' silver eagles on its doors."

Michael nodded slowly, eying the merchants and townspeople passing before him. Some of them turned into the

cathedral which, since the time of Henry VIII, was no longer the hallowed place it once had been but had become instead a mart for the selling of houses and sweetmeats, bolts of cloth and the bodies of women. To the north stood the shops of the merchants, to the south the arched gateway which gave entrance to the square. It was a good place to meet and talk sainthood or villainy. There were so many faces to see, scant attention would be paid to any one.

"And then?" he asked.

"When the coach appears, I jump from the shadows and show my snappers—them fine pistols you do be giving me—and cry out for him to halt."

"The odds are the driver'll rein up. If he doesn't, fire a ball past his chin."

"Yes, sir. Then I throw open the coach door and ask her ladyship for her purse."

"And at that exact moment I appear, hurl you to one side and clobber you alongside the jaw. I'll also disarm you, you understand?"

"I do. After I fall down I scramble up and leg it."

"As fast as you can. I don't want you around to embarrass me." Michael made his wink an invitation to a lewd conjecture. He tapped the ashes of his pipe into a palm and shook them free. "You have the monies I gave you and the pistols. The next time I see you will be this evening near Newgate Market."

Roger Carew nodded and rose from the length of fallen masonry to move into the passing crowd, mingling with physician and apprentice, with beggars in rags and breadsellers. In a moment he was swallowed up behind a passing cart.

Michael sat for a little while longer, letting hunger stir in his middle while his gaze roved the faces and figures of the passers-by. Caution was the watchword by which he lived. He must guard himself against every passing beggar lest he prove a man sent to murder him; he must live like any rogue without a common brotherhood to protect him. He dared take no one into his confidence except a man like Roger Carew, sent to him by Meg as a loyal Englishman known to her from her Hampshire Downs country. Even his very character was changing. Michael Godby was not the honest man Michael



Goddard had been; he was furtive and sly these days, quick to suspicion, quick to mistrust.

He lived by his wits and his sword arm. If either failed him, he was a dead man. And yet he found a certain enjoyment in the challenges he was called upon to meet. There was a fierce, cold anger in him at Lord Cavendish and the Spanish party. He could not forget those endless hours in the cellar dungeon of Montrose House or the beating he had suffered at the fists of Sir Edmund Morton's bullies. His hand clenched at his thigh. He was making his Lordship pay for that bit of torture and would go on making him pay until Captain Michael Goddard stood a free man, absolved of all charges of treachery and theft.

v.

The November wind came whipping across the great square of Newgate Market. It gathered the leaves that had fallen from the trees flanking the flagstones and swept them in a spiral past the massive stone prison. The rain that had fallen in late afternoon glistened wetly on the cobbles. The raw air made the man in the long black cloak gather its folds more tightly about his shoulders and sink his chin deeper into its standing collar.

The sound of rattling coach wheels brought him away from the shop doorway where he had taken shelter. He watched the candle lamps of a coach recede and vanish along Pater-noster Row. The hour was growing late. According to Meg, Lady Brampton always left the game room of the Bull and Mouth at St. Martin le Grand some minutes before midnight. It was her custom to drive by way of Aldersgate Street, Newgate Street and The Market to her city house close by Black Friars.

Would this night prove an exception?

Had she been warned in some manner?

Michael told himself he would wait another hour on the off-chance she had been delayed by a lucky run of cards. He moved past a row of leaded shopwindows, walking briskly for warmth. As he turned in his pacing he heard another coach

approaching from the north. He shrank back into the shadows, aware that his heart was thudding with excitement.

At this moment he was so close to victory! Let him get his hands on that little account book which contained the cipher used by Sir Andrew Mattingly, and Sir Edmund Morton was as good as sentenced to die for his treachery.

The coach was nearer, its candle lamps glowing. By their radiance Michael could see the silver eagle that was the Brampton coat of arms winking at him from the door panels. Where was Roger Carew? Ah, there! Running across the cobbles, calling out, both pistols in his hands.

His voice came loud on the wind. "Rein in, driver. Rein in or take a pistol ball!"

The coach brakes squealed. Horses' hooves clattered, striking sparks. A woman cried out sharply from inside the coach.

The pock-marked man was flinging open the door and reaching inward. This was the signal for Michael to act. He flung himself forward, dragging out his rapier as he went.

His hand caught Roger Carew by the collar. He heard wool rip sharply as he dragged him from the coach, hurling him to one side so that he stumbled and fell. A pistol came up, firing. Michael saw the red flash, heard the whistle of the ball past his cheek. Then he was lunging downward with his blade, just missing the wiry Carew. At that same instant Michael heard a clatter of hooves from Newgate Street.

A musket roared.

Carew crouched a moment, staring wildly across the length of the Market at the dozen men galloping down on him. He glanced at Michael with a wry grin, then leaped up and took to his heels. In consternation, Michael saw the men swerving to go after him.

"Halloo, you men!" he roared. "Come give me a hand."

Two of the horsemen drew rein as the others held to their pounding gallop. They turned their horses' heads and cantered toward the coach. Michael stared beyond them, trying to pierce the darkness and catch a glimpse of the pock-marked man who was out of sight now, legging it up Warwick Lane. If Carew had his wits about him he'd hop into one of the gardens adjoining the private houses along Ludgate Street or

Old Bailey. A man on foot could lose himself among those yew bushes and flower plats.

Michael turned toward the coach. A woman crouched inside it, half kneeling on the floor, her face white and frightened. A curl of yellow hair had come down and lay against her cheek, giving her the look of a schoolgirl playing at maturity. Michael bent and lifted the velvet purse which lay on the floor. He pressed it into her fingers as his hands reached out to lift her gently from the coach.

Harriet Ormsley, Lady Brampton, was a ripely curved woman, all flesh and perfume in bodice and skirt of white taffeta decorated with golden threads. Her hair was very blonde and caught up in a caul of seed pearls. The fright that made her cheeks so pallid gave way to a touch of color when she felt his strong arms about her middle as he lowered her to the cobblestones.

"Are you harmed?" Michael asked.

"Thanks to you, no, good sir. It was prompt action on your part. I'm most grateful." She lay warmly soft against him, staring into his face with searching eyes.

"I heard you cry out and came running. Anyone would have done the same."

"But at such risk to yourself. He fired at you. I thought for a moment he'd killed you."

One of the horsemen coughed. Lady Brampton released herself from Michael's clasp and turned. "Well? Did you catch the knave?"

"Beg pardon, milady. This gentleman called for assistance, so we reined aside. The others went after him. Was it the man we're seeking?"

"And who else do you suppose it might be?"

"Very good, milady. With your permission we'll go after him." The rider hesitated, glancing at Michael. "Will you be all right now?"

"With this gentleman to ride beside me, I think I can reach home safely. Yes. It's not likely Captain Seadog will make another attempt this night."

Michael forced a gasp to his lips. "Captain Seadog? The highwayman?"

Harriet Ormsley bit her lip. She nodded. "I'd not meant to

let his name slip out that way. He's made threats against me. It's why I rode with these servants to stand guard on my coach."

Michael reflected that the horsemen would have done greater service had they ridden closer to the coach they were to guard. Traveling at such a distance in the rear smacked more of ambuscade than safeguard. Yet he nodded gravely as she smiled up at him.

"The streets are as dangerous as the high seas these days, milady. I'd consider it a rare honor to act your escort for the balance of your journey."

Her fingers tightened promisingly on his hand. Then she turned to the riders, gesturing them off. Michael noted that she stood close beside him and that the knee which touched his own was not withdrawn until the riders disappeared and he stepped back to hand her into the coach.

"You'll come in for a sip of wine when we reach Ormsley Hall, of course?" she asked, settling her lace petticoats and skirt about her legs. "To permit me to say a proper thanks to my rescuer?"

"Your Ladyship is too kind. I was on my way home after an evening spent at Burbage's Theatre and over the cups at the Falcon Tavern. My name is William Parker."

Lady Brampton leaned closer to sniff at his breath, and Michael blessed the foresight that had made him swallow two goblets of Canary a little earlier. Her gesture allowed his eyes to search the low opening of her bodice and judge for himself the opulence of the breasts laid bare for his gaze. It was the custom not only for courtesans and harlots to expose their bosoms, but for ladies of good birth and breeding as well. Critics like Vaughan-Burder, Nashe and Pyrrye spoke openly against this wantonness, but fashion demanded naked paps and so the ladies displayed them shamelessly.

At the moment, a little overwhelmed by her ladyship's generosity, he could only stare and smile. When he collected his wits he leaned and whispered, "Already I have been rewarded. I'm not used to such prodigalities of loveliness."

Her laughter tinkled as she leaned a shoulder against him. "Flatterer," she whispered. "You almost have me believing you, you say such pleasant things with such a straight face."

Lady Brampton was proffering her red mouth for his kiss as she spoke, her bright eyes narrowed languorously. Michael found the invitation too tempting to withstand and slipped an arm about the small of her back, arching her upward. As his mouth captured her lips her hand crept behind his neck to hold him prisoner. He made a very happy captive, he told himself. Lady Brampton was as knowledgeable as she was avid. She nestled warmly in his arms and proved herself very grateful indeed.

As the coach slowed to swing into an open grille gateway, Michael found that his breathing had become somewhat hurried and that his earlier excitement as he stood in the recessed shop doorway had increased tenfold. His blood danced a merry galliard for which the touch of his palms to her bared breasts provided the tune.

As he led her with an arm about her waist toward the vaulted door of her town house, Michael reflected that being Captain Seadog provided its own compensations. During one adventure he might crouch naked on a rooftop while his clothes burned in a great bonfire or risk death before a flashing sword blade in another, but there were nights like this to make up for them, when a pretty woman panted to his kisses or writhed slowly to his caressing hands.

In the hallway Lady Brampton whispered, "Give me a moment to dismiss my maidservant, dear heart. I'll not be long."

She touched fingertips to lips, then pressed them against his mouth. He reached for her but she was gone, slim ankles flashing beneath her brocaded skirt. When she was out of sight Michael permitted himself the luxury of a scowl.

It may have been her custom to carry her account book in her purse, as Lord Kelsey had informed him, but the book had not been in her purse when he'd picked it up off the coach floor and handed it to her. His fingers had squeezed it tightly as he thrust it into her hand. There had been nothing as large as the book in the purse; only a few coins.

They had expected Captain Seadog to strike, then. The horsemen riding behind were not to serve as guards but rather as ambushers. When he attacked they were to gallop forward and catch him. Obviously Lord Kelsey had run to Lord Morton almost as soon as he'd left Blossom's Inn.



Michael moved about the wainscoted hallway. The caution he was learning these days and nights as Captain Seadog, and which prompted him to employ Roger Carew as a wedge to become acquainted with Milady Brampton, was proving profitable. Originally he had intended to rob the viscountess himself; but the more he thought over his meeting with Lord Kelsey the more concerned he became; he played for too high stakes to risk losing everything at a single throw of the dice. He agreed with Meg that he should use care. Between them they had worked out the gambit which involved Roger Carew.

At best, should she carry the account book on her person, he would take it and flee. If she did not carry the book with her, he would appear her rescuer and so worm his way into her confidence. The appearance of the horsemen had been a complete surprise.

Neither had he any guarantee that Sir Edmund Morton would not come hotfooting it to Brampton House this very night. Certainly he would come if his riders captured Roger Carew and learned he was not Captain Seadog. Sir Edmund might call in young Lord Kelsey to identify him. Michael shifted uneasily.

He must not stay to risk exposure by Lord Cavendish.

His hand was reaching for the doorknob when he heard hurrying footsteps. He swung around and put a smile on his face as Lady Brampton came from the lower stair and rushed into his arms. Holding her close, he kissed the tip of her nose and the corners of her mouth. He could scarcely run off now without rousing her suspicions. He fought down an urge to laugh. The fact that Sir Edmund Morton might put in a surprise appearance would only add zest to an already eventful evening.

For Lady Brampton was leading him up the wide stair with its carved wooden balusters and bulbous newel posts, past the paintings on the paneled walls, with her fingers clasping his hand. Her air of feverish anticipation was contagious; Michael became aware of throbbing blood and of the sudden dryness of his mouth.

"Anne left two bottles of Rhenish on my dresser table, dear one. Are you athirst?"

"As if with fever!"

In the shadow of her bedroom doorway he turned her to him with a gentle hand and kissed her. Against her mouth he whispered, "Most of all I thirst for the touch of your sweet lips."

"You say your name is William Parker. I believe it to be something else, good Billy. You speak with the tongue of a Spenser or a Sidney."

"Only because your beauty taught me to speak the truth!"

Viscountess Brampton leaned against him, kissing across his throat and upward to his lips. "Flatterer. Liar. Cheat. Rogue. All these and more you are. And yet you're very handsome and quite virile. If I didn't know better I'd say you were the dashing Captain Seadog yourself."

Michael kissed an earlobe. "What's your quarrel with this jackanapes, sweet Harriet?"

"'Tis nothing. A political matter. No more."

"If the knave threatens you I'll seek him out and match steel with him!"

"Mmmm, no. I'd rather you spent your energies another way, dear heart. Such as"—she turned her back to him—"untying these busk points that lace up my bodice. Are your hands as deft with busk strings as they are with—"

With the whalebone busk half open, he bent to kiss her smooth shoulder. Lady Brampton sighed and trembled as she whispered, "They are as deft, I see, and as daring. La, good Billy, you'll tear my Holland smock, which is my only undergarment outside a petticoat or two."

"Then don't wriggle so!"

As his palms slipped into the busk and along her smooth sides, she let her head drop back against his shoulder. "Dear heart, the door—I feel very wicked exposed this way in the hall and—"

"You open the door. My hands are filled with so much delight they absolutely refuse to abandon their sweet task."

The brocaded busk slipped loose. Her smock lay rumpled at her waist when Michael finally released her, permitting her to run ahead of him into the bedchamber. His eyes were on the smooth perfection of her back and so he saw her glance over a shoulder at him, then look aside at the blank wall a moment before she came to her standing chest. Her laughter

was rich and inviting as she caught up the leather bottles resting there and held them high.

"Catch," she called and tossed a bottle to him.

They drank deep, the woman retreating slowly before the steady advance of the man. Where the canopied bed made an angle against the wall he caught her, fastening her wrists in his hands and extending her arms until it seemed she lay nailed to the wall. Her pointed breasts trembled fitfully with the emotion that flushed her cheeks.

"You're a wicked man, sirrah!"

"Not half so wicked as you are lovely!"

"You give me no chance to breathe," she panted.

"Then grow faint and fall!"

"I'll land on the bed."

They kissed. Now her arms were flung around him and Michael would not have cared if the entire College of Heraldry came flooding into the chamber. This woman was a flame eating in his blood, the whisper of her words a madness blinding him to reality. She was shameless, but the animal in his nature enjoyed that immodesty. There was an age of public vice and of much private immorality. Women of good breeding did not scruple to use their bodies to win attention at court. Every wayside tavern had its harlots. At a time when children were married at twelve years of age, when open immorality was permitted during such festivals as May Day and Misrule Day, it was no wonder that a chance acquaintance proved so intimate.

They collapsed together through the heavy bed drapings. Lady Harriet laughed invitingly as she permitted a further disrobement of her body, but turned aside when he would have concluded their play.

"A moment only," she whispered.

He watched her reach for the wine bottle and tilt it to her lips. It came to Michael that Viscountess Brampton was afraid, that terror forced her to this hurried drinking, this intoxication of the senses, as a way to forgetfulness. She knows the loss of the red leather account book means her death for treachery! This was the reason for her behavior. There was something of pity in him as he drew her down against the bedcovers. . . .

Much later Michael roused from beside the sleeping wom-

an. His hand shook as he reached for his clothes. Weariness made his head reel so that it required a definite act of will to draw on doublet and hose. Somewhere in this house the book he sought lay hidden.

But where?

Lady Brampton would not secret it far from her person. Of that he was confident. It meant too much to her. No, she would keep it close by, in this very room perhaps. His gaze raked the painted brocades that decorated the walls above the wainscoting and the big stone fireplace with its standing screen. A little further on was her oak standing chest and clothes cupboard.

He paused, hesitant. "She wouldn't trust her servants enough to leave it about so they might find and steal it. If I only had a clue!"

Michael glanced at the bed and the woman sprawled out on its rumpled covers. A more calloused man might shake her into wakefulness and force the truth from her by violence. Michael made a wry face. Daredevil and rogue Captain Godby might be, yet he was no crude lout to touch torch to flesh in order to learn a hiding place.

Stay a moment! Perhaps he did have a clue!

Filled with concern for her safety, the first thing Lady Brampton would have done upon entering her bedroom was check the location of her precious red leather book. Had she done it? No, not that he could remember. She'd gone at once to the standing chest that held the wine bottles and lifted them high.

And before that?

Why, as her hand opened the door she went ahead of him into the room, glancing back flirtatiously over a bared shoulder. Ah, yes! And as she looked at him she had looked also at the blank wall to the left of the door. He recalled that fleeting glimpse, that moment when her eyes had narrowed slightly as if to aid her vision.

Michael moved to the wall. It was covered with cloth above the paneling as were all the walls. The heavy brocade showed a hunting scene. From wainscot to ceiling there was no break in the cloth. He must be mistaken.

Michael lifted a candle and went once again to the wall.

Now he pressed his cheek against it, starting along the rough surface. Nothing! Hold on, though. That speck of black shadow against the hide of a leaping stag! Surely it was out of place on that tawny skin. He moved closer, fingertips reaching.

It was a hole, a tiny opening in the wall. A keyhole? On further search his eyes could detect the thin line where the brocade had been slit as if to cover a small wall-door. Excitement flushed his cheeks. Surely this was a secret compartment, cleverly disguised.

"A key! She'll have a key."

He found the small iron key in her velvet purse. After that it was only a matter of seconds to insert the bit and ease open the disguised compartment door. The red leather account book lay inside, waiting for his hand. His fingers closed on it greedily.

He shut and locked the door; restored key to purse. Then he moved from the room like a shadow slipping over the Turkish carpet. He waited until he was on the street before he ran.



## Chapter Eleven

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LORD EDMUND MORTON sat up in bed in answer to the frantic calling of his name. To his dumfounderment he discovered Harriet Ormsley, Viscountess Brampton, crouched beside the big four-poster with her hands clasped in terror and tears streaming down her pallid cheeks.

Lord Edmund stared from her crumpled features into the disapproving eyes of his gentleman in waiting. "Her ladyship would not consent to wait, m'lord. She insisted—thrust herself past me, that is—and entered." The impassive lackey lifted his dressing gown and held it so his lordship could slip his arms into the roomy sleeves.

"Now then, Harriet——"

"The account book's gone!"

Lord Cavendish waved a hand at his gentleman in waiting, who turned and left the room, closing the big oak door gently behind him. Instantly Sir Edmund was beside the woman, catching her shoulders in his hands and shaking them.

"When? How? Oh God, this comes of trusting imbeciles!"

"He was such a handsome man I never thought——"

She wept as his lordship waved impatient hands in the air. "Who? What man? Damme, Harriet! Can't you talk coherently for once?"

The story poured out between sobs. When she was done, collapsing and weeping convulsively at the edge of the bed, he was pale and shaken.

"It means our deaths, of course. No doubt of that."

"Edmund, I don't want to die. . . ."

"Do I? Do any of us? If only there were some way of discovering where and when he will present those proofs to the Queen!"

He paced up and down the room, loose dressing gown swirling at his calves. Again and again his fist pounded in a palm. He did not hear Lady Harriet sobbing, nor did he watch the many times she wiped her moist eyes with a lace kerchief. Frenzy was a pain in his chest; he found it hard to breathe; every step he took made him realize that unless he acted soon and swiftly, he had little time left in which to walk at all.

He whirled suddenly and advanced on the woman. "Harriet, if you've ever thought before, you must think now. You know the court as well as any of us and better than most. Who is this Captain Seadog?"

"I don't know," she wailed, shaking her head back and forth. "I never saw him before last night. At first I thought it was the man who first held me up. Then—later, that is—I realized it must have been the man who rescued me, who stayed the night——"

"And you never saw him before?" he asked incredulously.

Her head shook back and forth. "Never, never."

"I was sure Seadog would prove to be a courtier. Positive of it! It stands to reason he must be. He knows things only people at court would know. Little intimate things about people and their habits. No commoner would be able to learn such information. Not as swiftly, at least, as this Seadog learns it. Some of his feats suppose a knowledge even I don't possess. He knew Kelsey would stay at the Blossom's Inn as was his custom. I didn't learn that myself until later. But Seadog knew it."

Viscountess Brampton sniffled. "He's afraid of the Marchioness of Mann. She's a regular old battle-ax and terrifies him."

"You see? You knew that. Ah—of course! This Seadog may work with a confederate, someone who supplies him with information! But who? Who? It would have to be someone close to Elizabeth. There's Leicester and Raleigh and Walsingham, Essex and Cecil and Hatton—the list's endless!"

"No, no," disagreed Lady Brampton with a hopeful air. "I don't think it's a man at all. There's a woman's hand in this, Edmund."

"A woman?"

Her hands spread. "Consider! Does a man know such de-

tails about a coming marriage as the fact that Lord Kelsey fears his future mother-in-law? Or that he loves Isobel Mann so much he mortgaged his estates to match her dowry money?"

"Some men might," he pondered.

"Not a man in such a high position in court as to learn other things Seadog knows. Every man I know is too worried over the reports that Spain is massing ships and men at Lisbon to bother about wedding gossip."

"I know, I know. I've been requested to lead a rebellion by the Spanish ambassador. But how can I strike without arms? Seadog stole the monies I earmarked to buy powder and ball. He's crippled me. Spain is ready to pounce, and despite all my fine plans I can't do a thing to help."

He moved back and forth in the room until he came to stand before the stone fireplace, arms lifted to lean against it, staring into the flames. "A woman, you say. I never suspected. Yes, I suppose it might be. But I can't stake my neck on suppositions."

The viscountess frowned. "There aren't many court ladies active enough to keep up with a man like Seadog. The Countess of Northumberland's too old. The Countess of Pembroke hates the Queen's very guts."

"A young woman, perhaps? Unmarried, certainly. No husband would let his wife go traipsing off with Seadog all over the country!"

Lady Brampton walked back and forth, making fluttering little motions with her hands. "An unmarried young woman high in the Queen's good graces, which she'd have to have to learn some of the things she does."

"Lady Hamilton?"

"A scatterbrain too much concerned with young courtiers to bother her pretty head about state affairs."

"The Baroness of Everleigh?"

"Confined to her bed these past few weeks with a broken hip suffered in a tumble from a horse. And she rarely leaves her estates since her husband died."

Anger flashed in Lord Cavendish. "It can't be done. We'll never know who she is!"

"Be patient, be patient. The list is— Oh my God!"

The triumph was so clear in her voice Morton whipped about in haste, his elbow striking a rush-light holder and sending it clattering to the floor. "Well? Well? Speak out, Harriet!"

"Meg Sutton! The Countess of Sunderland! She's so often gone from court I rarely think of her. Yet when she's in London or at Windsor, she and Elizabeth are thick as thieves."

"So often gone from court. Yes, yes. I recall now that she does move about the country. She was at Hardicamp Manor the night the gold coach was robbed."

"And nestled safe in Vickersby Hall when Seadog held up Sir John Pentworth on Salisbury Plain. I was a guest at Vickersby Hall myself that week end. You can look out across Salisbury from the hall gatehouse."

"If only I could check on her whereabouts when Captain Seadog was busy about his other affairs. But there's no time. We'll have to take the chance we're right."

"I'm sure it's Meg, Edmund."

He eyed her sharply. "Sure enough to risk your neck you're right? That's what it means, you know."

Lady Brampton put hands to her cheeks, trembling. After a moment she nodded. "Yes. I'm positive it must be Meg Sutton who's working with Seadog, if only for the simple reason I can't think of anyone else it could be."

"Then we'll put men to watch her. When Seadog brings her his proofs—Mattingly's accounts and your notebook—we'll strike."

"Edmund."

"Eh?"

"Forget your vengeance on Seadog this once. Order your men to snatch the books and forget about killing the man. Our necks depend on it."

Lord Morton laughed harshly. "Not likely! I want Seadog dead in his grave."

"And if, while your men are engaged in slaying him, the sound of the struggle brings rescuers? What then? You'll not have killed Seadog and you'll not have saved your own neck, just because of this hotheadedness of yours! Edmund, those books are deadly dangerous to us all! They must be burned—forever destroyed!"

Edmund Morton nodded gloomily. "I suppose you're right."

If I stay alive I can always revenge myself on him. I can't do that if the Queen hangs or beheads me."

Lady Brampton sighed, "He's so handsome, this Captain Seadog."

Lord Cavendish made an ungracious sound.

*ii.*

Michael Goddard dismounted at the red brick gatehouse straddling the road leading into the vast grounds of Hartwell Manor. As a liveried attendant lifted a small carrying case from the saddle and placed it in his hands, he said, "The Countess of Sunderland expects me. Will you tell her Captain Godby has come with the books she's purchased? I'm confident she'll understand."

The grave-faced gateman looked him over with indifferent eyes. "You may wait on the lower lawn beside the maze. I'll speak with Her Grace."

His attitude suggested that Her Grace had better things to do than concern herself about a certain Captain Godby.

Michael walked from the gatehouse toward the lower lawn along a narrow path bordered by flowering tulips. His step was jaunty. This day would mark the end of the troubles which had assailed him since that rain-swept night in Plymouth when he'd rescued Meg from attack by the Spanish party. The books weighing down the carrying case under his arm contained not only enough proof to hang Sir Edmund and other traitors but were evidence of his own loyalty as well. Those books were as warming to his heart as the sun was on his shoulders.

He approached a great rectangle of box hedge fully a hundred yards long, shaped and trimmed in the intricate passageways of a great maze. The hedge was almost eight feet tall, kept neat and trim. Michael had heard of these labyrinths of hedgework which decorated many of the manor lawns, but he had never seen one. Situated in their centers were small gardens usually fitted with fountains and rose arbors for lovers.

The entrance was framed by twin marble benches. Clasp- ing his carrying case, Michael seated himself gingerly. In the



distance he could hear laughter and an occasional shout of delight. He stirred restlessly. What was keeping Meg? Twice he rose to his feet and strolled. Anxiety made him frown and stare toward the upper lawn.

Judging from the sounds, the court was playing at bowls. Even from this distance he could hear the click of the balls against the wooden pins. He took two steps forward, then halted.

Two women appeared, walking in leisurely fashion past a white summer garden with an ornately decorated cupola. Michael stared. One woman was Margaret, Lady Sutton; he would know her dear face anywhere. The other—

“God’s blood!” he whispered. “It’s Harriet Ormsley!”

Michael told himself he had no reason to fear the viscountess. If anything, she should be afraid of him and of the books he carried. Yet if she should recognize him—which she would once she clapped eyes on him—she would give the alarm. The entire court would know Captain Seadog was here! Michael did not fear for himself as much as he feared for Meg. He carried death to the high members of the Spanish party in this case. Word would get around fast enough of what he had done. There would be some who might seek revenge against him. And against Lady Margaret.

Michael drew back between the benches into the entrance to the maze. “I can defend myself, but who’s to protect Meg from a possible assassin’s dagger?”

No, he must not be seen waiting for her. If there was nothing to connect Captain Seadog with the Duchess of Sunderland, Meg would not be harmed. He slipped backward into the narrow runway between the high hedges, hidden from sight.

After a little wait he heard their voices.

“La, Meg! Why try to fool me? Your lover’s waiting somewhere near here. And I insist on meeting him. To think of the reputation you bear for being a Mistress Arrogance, yet you’re here now to match kisses with a lover.”

“Harriet darling, you amuse me with your fertile imagination. I felt a trifle faint. Bowling always overtires my poor strength.”

“Oh, Meg! I vow you’re the strongest of us all at bowls or

any other sport. Nay now, I saw Ichabod speak with you. As soon as he whispered in your ear you made an excuse to run off. What did he say? That some dashing gallant is pining with love for sight of your fair face? Or that some nobleman vows to kill himself unless you honor him with your presence?"

"You keep a close watch on me, Harriet."

"Only because I'm so fond of you, Meg, darling."

They were at the marble benches. Taffeta rustled as if one woman had seated herself. A louder rustle made Michael dart along the narrow mazeway and seek refuge in a further turn of the corridor.

"Is he in here, Meg? Is the maze your rendezvous? La, he must carry a lodestone in his head if he knows the secrets of this labyrinth. 'Tis said not even Lord Hartwell himself is familiar with all its devious passageways."

"Why don't you go searching for him in there, dear Harriet? I'll wait on the bench."

"And have you slip away to meet another time? No, no. Rather you go in and meet him while I remain outside. Go on. I'll not take nay for an answer. Your swain waits for your kisses. Be generous with them."

Lady Brampton laughed softly, gaily, but Michael caught the edge of hysteria that lay in her throat. She could act no different if she really knew I was Captain Seadog and that Meg was an accomplice in my escapades! The suspicion and caution in which he had lived during the past year and a half were alive in his mind once again.

He shrank against the box hedge, straining every sense. The carrying case was like a ship's anchor in his hands. Cursing the folly that made him ride unarmed to Hartwell Manor, he glanced around. There was no place here in which to hide his precious books as there had been a pond for the Spanish party gold! Slowly he moved backward, further into the hedge runways.

"I tell you, Harriet—"

"Now, now. The flush on your cheeks is confession enough. Look. Yonder comes Sir Edmund Morton. I'll keep your secret, I promise, and lead him away from the maze if you go in."

"Ohhh—very well. Anything to be rid of your lewd hints

and insinuations." An instant later Michael caught a flash of white satin as Lady Margaret penetrated deeper into the maze. He put a forefinger to his lips and stepped into the next passage so Meg could see him.

She opened her eyes wide and ran, flinging herself into his arms. Michael held her tenderly, touched by the trembling of her body. "Dearest, just hold me," she whispered. "Tighter, tighter! I'm sure Lady Harriet knows we suspect her. She's kept her eyes on me ever since she arrived at Hartwell Manor. And Sir Edmund watches me when she does not. Michael—I think they know we work together."

"The knowledge won't do them any good. It's too late. I have their records in this carrying case. All we need do is present it to the Queen."

Terror was a brilliance in her eyes. "Ah, but don't you see? The Queen isn't here! I expected her, yes. That's why I sent word for you to come to Hartwell Manor. But Elizabeth changed her mind or was cajoled into changing it by some high-ranking Spanish party member at Sir Edmund's request."

Coldness rippled down his spine as Michael listened. To be so close to winning, and then failing! He said heavily, "You're trying to tell me we're surrounded by traitors. That the men and women here at Hartwell Manor are members of the Spanish party."

"Nearly all!"

"And here we stand like mice in a trap waiting to be slain."

Lady Margaret put her face against his chest, shuddering uncontrollably. When Michael chuckled she looked up at him. "You find humor in the moment?"

"An ironic humor. We hold our freedom in this carrying case."

"Morton won't let you get away alive!"

"He will if it will win back his precious account books. Morton wants me dead for personal reasons. The members of the Spanish party named by Sir Andrew Mattingly and Lady Harriet Ormsley in their books are far more interested in saving their necks than in wringing mine."

Hope made her smile wistfully. "Can you accomplish this trade?"

"Leave that to me. Come now, put on a smile. Be cheerful.

We'll simply stroll out and bargain. Morton will oppose me, but I'm counting on the other members who are here to induce him to be reasonable."

"Sir Edmund reasonable? As well ask the moon to turn red!"

"Nevertheless we'll make the try."

His hand held her fingers on his forearm as Michael moved along the hedgework corridor toward the entrance. Now he could hear many voices in the distance, coming nearer. Lord Cavendish had sent for reinforcements.

As they stepped forth between the marble benches, Lady Brampton cried out in surprise. "Edmund! They're here. And—yes, he's the one. He's Captain Seadog!"

Surprise held Morton frozen for a moment; in that instant Michael leaped. His hands went out and caught the nobleman by wrist and shoulder; whirled him about; jammed wrist and hand upward to hold him motionless.

"Warn off your bullies, Milord Morton!" he growled in his ear. "Or you risk a broken arm."

"You filthy devil! I should have guessed Michael Goddard was also Captain Seadog. I often wondered what happened to you and how you were able to disappear into thin air the way you did. I had men searching——"

"Your hired thugs are running this way, milord. Order them to remain where they are!"

"Hoy, you men. Stand and don't move! Time enough to put a pistol ball in our man when I slip away from him."

Michael smiled grimly. "Yes, that's better. Now then. I was about to offer you a trade, your lordship. I find circumstances have presented me with much better material than a book for bargaining. Your life against our safe departure. Is it agreed?"

"Never! I'll only hang anyway once you give the Queen those books. Kill me now if you can and my men will slay you and do worse mayhap to Lady Sutton— AHH!" The sharp exclamation of pain was torn from his throat at Michael's instinctive reaction.

Michael said, "I'll make a further deal. We get away safely—Milady Sutton and I—and you get the books you want. Both books."

Harriet Ormsley begged, "Edmund! It isn't you alone who may suffer, but all of us!"

Lord Cavendish was stiff with fury. His cheeks were flushed deep red. Michael could see the raging pulsebeat in a temple. As Lady Brampton continued to plead, however, the stiffness went out of him. He shrugged and let his head fall forward to his chest.

"You're right, Harriet. God knows I'd risk my own neck to make sure this man died, but I haven't the right to risk yours or any of the others. All right, Goddard. I'm agreed. What's your plan?"

"The books for our lives. An hour's start with you as hostage. The loan of a pistol and sword to make sure you remain my prisoner until the hour's up. After that let your men try to catch us if they can."

"The books?" quavered Lady Brampton.

"I'll throw one book out the coach window as we start. If there's any pursuit I'll put a pistol ball in Morton. When I release Sir Edmund I'll give him the other book."

Lady Harriet said promptly, "There'll be no pursuit. We're all too happy to get the books back to take any more risk of losing them."

Sir Edmund said, "And can we trust you to do what you promise?"

"I'd be a fool not to. I'm doing this for Lady Sutton, Morton. If I were alone I'd take on your bullies in a fight inside that hedge maze. No more than one could come at me at any time. Do you want to take that chance even now?"

"No," cried Lady Harriet. "We are agreed."

Morton walked sullenly to the big coach beside the manor house. Michael carried his sword and baldric over a shoulder while a long-barreled pistol weighted down his hand. Meg held the carrying case tightly.

As the coach began to roll, Michael leaned from the window and tossed out the big account book belonging to Sir Andrew Mattingly. Sinking back into the upholstered seat, he said to Lord Cavendish, "An hour from now I'll turn over Lady Brampton's little volume. Before those sixty minutes are up we must be in sight of London!"

Lord Cavendish sat back and crossed his legs, very much



at ease. His eyes went from Lady Margaret to Michael with unconcealed amusement. His presence placed a constraint on them which he appeared to understand. After a little while he gestured with a hand.

"I'll be gone in a short while, then you'll be free to weep on each other's shoulders." When they only stared at him he smiled wryly. "Come now. There's no need for sullenness. You made a good fight of it, Captain Goddard. You've paid me back for having imprisoned you. It isn't defeat. It's only stalemate. Neither of us has won the victory."

"You're still alive," Michael said harshly. "That makes you the victor. I'll rest only when you're dead."

"I see you can hate as well as I. I'm glad." The amusement was gone out of him, replaced by a deadly venom glistening in his dark eyes. "It will make my final triumph so much the sweeter. For I intend to win. Oh, yes. In one way or another I'll hunt you down and kill you. There isn't anything you can do to stop me."

Michael lifted the long-barreled pistol until it pointed at Morton's head. "I can put a lead ball between your eyes."

Sir Edmund laughed and seemed to relax even more. "Not you, Goddard. You're one of those rare birds, a man of principles. It sounds very fine, that phrase—from a throne or a pulpit—but for actual, everyday life it's a bit of a weight for a man to carry around. Now I have no principles. If our positions had been reversed you'd never escape with your life. I'd kill you, toss your body into a ditch and make another try for Sir Andrew's account book."

"You tempt me to follow your example."

"I'm not worried. Intangibles like honor and loyalty mean something to you. They don't to me. Money and power: those are the only things that really matter. We're really very different individuals, Captain."

Lord Cavendish laughed cynically and, turning his head aside, rested it on the upholstered cushion behind him. They went the rest of the way in silence. Where the road forked left toward Enfield and south to London, the driver drew rein. Sir Edmund stirred; stretched and yawned, and put out his hand.

"Milady Brampton's book, Captain. She has a very great

desire to see it consumed in flames." As his fingers closed over the volume, Morton looked thoughtful. "If it's any satisfaction to you, I'll admit you've scotched the rebellion we'd planned to strike against Elizabeth just as the Spanish Armada was landing its soldiers on England's soil. I tell you this so that, while you yourself will have the satisfaction of knowing you're a hero, my own personal vengeance will be so much sweeter. It's always more rewarding to overthrow a hero rather than a nobody. It does something for one's vanity."

"Get out," said Michael thickly and opened the coach door.

As the driver snapped his whip and the big carriage picked up speed, Michael glanced back at the figure of Lord Cavendish standing straight and proud beside the milestone that marked the route to Enfield. As he watched, Sir Edmund threw back his head and laughed.

In Michael's ears it was the kind of laughter with which Satan might greet a newly fallen soul at the flaming gates of Hell. He might have put up a good fight, but there was no doubt in his mind that Morton had beaten him. Without his proofs he was still a fugitive from justice.

Cavendish was alive. That in itself was a defeat.

The sound of soft weeping recalled Michael to the woman beside him. Lady Margaret was opening her purse, lifting out a length of paper and handing it to him.

"It's a royal commission," she whispered between sobs, "made out to Captain Michael Goddard and giving him command of the *Devon Rose* in the coming sea fight with Spain's Armada. Everything is there except Elizabeth's signature.

"She promised me she'd sign it as soon as you brought those books to her. Now——"

His hands opened and smoothed the parchment. Blindly his eyes stared down, seeing the printed words, the royal authorization which would have made him the equal of every other seadog who would sail and fight his ship in defense of his homeland. Michael choked back a bitter curse.

"I even went so far as to ga-gather your old crew together in a wharfside tavern. It w-was to be a s-surprise. They're there as m-my guests, waiting for you to come and take command."

"Meg!"

She leaned against him, weeping softly. "I wanted to do something I knew you'd appreciate! Oh, Michael! Now everything is ruined."

His arms closed around her shoulders, his bitterness fading before the flood of tenderness working in him. "Meg, I—God knows I don't know how to say the thanks you deserve. Without you I'd be a dead man today. You've been both help and inspiration——"

His fingers tilted her chin so he could touch the corner of her mouth very gently with his lips. "I love you more than anything else in all this world, Meg darling. I'd hoped to join the sea battle against Spain not only to fight for England but for you as well, to defend you against your enemies."

Her hands held his fingers as she tried to smile. "I know, Michael. I wish it could be so."

Michael sat a little straighter. Excitement rippled through him, making him grip Meg's hand so hard she bit her lip to keep from crying out. "And it can be so! I can still command the *Devon Rose*!"

"Are you mad? The Dock Watch has impounded her."

"That only means she lies at anchor in the Thames with a man or two aboard to keep prowlers off. You say you have my old crew at a wharfside tavern? I'll go there and collect 'em. We'll put out in jolly boats from Billingsgate or Queen Hithe some dark night and slip aboard. I'll give the men on guard a chance of swimming or coming with us to fight the Spanish."

Lady Margaret said hesitatingly, "I don't doubt you could do it, but the Queen would be furious."

Michael smiled slyly. "It's your duty to inform her what I've done, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, but——"

He drew her up against him and kissed her soundly. "Good! It gives me an excuse to take you with me. After all, Captain Seadog can't leave a spy behind to prattle of where he goes and what he plans to do."

"Michael, you're impossible!"

"And very much in love."

Meg nestled closer and drew his arm about her shoulders.

Like that they rode through Hampstead Heath past Primrose Hill and into London by way of Gray's Inn Lane. Expectation held Michael in its grip: soon now he would stand on the poop deck of his ship; his voice would roar out over the waves and men would leap and the ship surge forward to the power of his cry. It was a feeling he was anxious to know again.

*iii.*

A crowd came running toward the Three Sails tavern in Idle Lane as Michael handed down Lady Margaret from the big coach. Young boys in tatters gaped from dirty gutters and slim girls in coarse lockram rags stared with wide eyes at a white satin gown the like of which they had never seen. Her elegance and beauty drew faces to the grimy windows of the Three Sails. As Michael escorted her over the cobbles the tavern door swung open. Black Mark stood grinning at them.

"Welcome 'ome, Cap'n! The boys do be all eagerness to 'ear the sound of your voice again." The Cornishman elbowed two staring sailors out of the way. "Back, you there. Give 'er ladyship room, ye swabs. One side, one side."

Lady Margaret flashed Michael a brief smile as Black Mark went before them, thrusting men from their path. They moved into the tavern and past the first few tables. The room was crowded with standing, silent men; all were members of his old crew, Michael realized. Black Mark led them to a small, windowed alcove fitted with planked table and twin benches. A pewter vase held a solitary red rose. Lady Margaret halted and cried out at sight of it. In the stale, grimy atmosphere of the tavern common room its beauty was unchallenged.

"Michael, it's gorgeous!"

Black Mark beamed and leaned closer. "Stolen it were, my lady," he confided, "by Gregory yonder and little Walter from a Houndsditch garden this morning. Still, it do smell as sweet as if we'd grown it ourselves."

"Indeed it does, Mark. Gregory and Walter, my thanks!"

Meg seated herself with a swish of satin skirt and looked around the common room. This was no Stag Tavern or Blos-

som's Inn where the gentry went to eat. Bunches of garlic hung in ropes from the blackened rafters, side by side with heavy cheeseheads. She saw a knife flash as a man cut himself a wedge of cheddar and stuffed it into his mouth. A little beyond him two bearded seamen were tilting back their wooden mugs, drinking so swiftly that the beer ran down over the rims of their cups and onto their hairy chests. There was a smell of unwashed bodies and rotten food in the air.

"I've seen better ordinaries," she smiled roguishly, "but none so filled with such honest fighting men."

The crew roared its approval. Men grinned and looked at one another, and crowded in a little closer to the alcove table.

Lady Margaret said, "I want to be honest with you. I have an unsigned commission for Captain Goddard from the Queen, giving him permission to take the *Devon Rose* out against the Spanish when—"

A deep-throated shout made the windowpanes rattle.

Meg raised her gloved hand. "The commission is unsigned. Your captain and I had hoped to secure that signature, but we failed. However, the *Devon Rose* has been outfitted and is ready to sail. All it takes are some hardy men not afraid to steal a ship in which to fight for Queen and country."

Black Mark climbed onto a beer-stained tabletop when she finished speaking. "Well? 'Ave ye lost yer tongues? Or do ee want her ladyship to think we're afeared of the damned Spanishers?"

"No!"

The word was a single explosion.

"What about the *Devon Rose*?" the Cornishman yelled.

"We takes 'er!"

"An hour arter sundown?" Black Mark asked.

"Aye—wi' darkness to hide our coming!"

The first mate dropped to the rush-strewn floor and walked in his rolling gait to the alcove table. His grin was wide and merry. "There be yer answer, milady. An' yours too, Cap'n. The men are wi' ye in this venture, every man jack of 'em. All they asks is a good deck underfoot and powder and ball for their cannon."

Meg smiled and caught Michael's hand. "You can put to sea this very evening, Captain. In anticipation of the signing of



your commission—and with Elizabeth's consent—I've had the *Devon Rose* made ready. She waits only for a captain, his mate and crew. Her anchor is sunk in the waters off the Tower Stairs."

"Meg, however can I thank you for everything you've done? If it weren't for you I'd be dead now, in all likelihood."

"A loss I'd mind more than you, Michael. Still, if you really are grateful, there's a way to show your thanks." Her eyes danced with mischief as Lady Margaret began to squirm excitedly.

His smile was tender. "What's it to be?"

"Take me with you on the *Devon Rose* when you go fight the Spanish. Michael, don't frown so. Please? Oh, Michael—please take me! You said you would."

"Meg, I can't. If anything were to happen to you—"

"My presence will make you fight harder!"

"In those clothes on a heaving deck—"

"I'll change 'em! Don breeches and jersey. I'll be your cabin boy. Peter Rawles is a grown man too much concerned with learning to be a master gunner to go back to his old employment."

She leaned across the tabletop, eyes dancing. Michael told himself Meg had never been lovelier than in this moment of her pleading. Even as he stared in helpless adoration he knew he could never refuse her.

"All right. Have your way. Cabin boy you are from—"

"Michael!"

In her exuberance Meg clasped his shoulders and leaned to kiss him. For an instant he felt the pressure of moist lips and the stab of an impudent tongue before the roar of delight from the grinning crew roused his sense of dignity. As she sat back on the bench Meg flushed prettily.

"You'll need clothes," he said.

"I have them in the coach, dear one. A small chest scarce three feet long lies beneath the driver's seat."

Michael laughed helplessly. "You think of everything."

A little later they were alone in an upstairs room with Michael's fingers at her busk strings, her magnificent white satin gown thrown carelessly over the truckle bed. Her shoulders rose up whitely from the underbodice; as more and more

of the strings came loose he could see her smooth back under the Holland smock.

"You'll make a most unusual cabin boy, Meg."

"Is it very shameless of me?"

"Loyal, rather. As anxious to fight for England as any man. And you deserve the chance. You've fought secretly long enough."

"Michael, hurry!"

"I find my fingers somewhat stiff. These laces are——"

"It isn't the laces that—— Michael!"

His arms brought her back against him, soft and yielding. The hands that thrust the whaleboned busk out of the way and went on to search her softness were trembling fitfully. She turned to press against him as her mouth opened to his kiss.

"We'll never get done if you interrupt your task this way, dearest," she murmured.

"We can't venture onto the Thames except after dark, and sunset is an hour or more away."

"Mmmm. You use such clever arguments."

"Meg—oh, Meg! I can't bear to lose you!"

"Hush, Michael. This is no time for sadness." With a faint smile she asked, "And what are you about now, darling?" She lifted a leg to ease the slide of a petticoat toward the floor. Her legs were slim and shapely beneath the lace hem of the thin camise.

Michael stood back and regarded her. "The smock must come off. No cabin boy serving under Captain Goddard wears such a garment."

One shoulder strap moved down. "Are you a harsh taskmaster, Michael? Your men worship you, I know. I can see it in their eyes." The second strap slipped loose and the smock began to fall. "I wonder how you act with them during a sea fight? I've always wanted to know that. Now I shall. Michael—turn away your eyes!"

"I can't. You're beautiful."

"Am I, darling? I'm glad."

Her upraised palm held him motionless. "The jersey, Michael. And the breeches."

"Does the cabin boy give orders to the captain?"

"I'm not your cabin boy yet."

He sighed and handed her the coarse breeches and striped woolen jersey. As each slim white leg was raised and thrust into the breeches, Michael sighed in honest delight; nor did he take his eyes from her trembling breasts when Meg raised the jersey above her head to slip it over upraised arms. When she stood clad at last and turned around for his inspection, Michael nodded.

"I approve. Now you're a full member of the crew, dear Meg. As such, you'll naturally obey all my orders."

"Naturally, Captain," she said demurely.

"Come closer, then. Closer yet. Ah!"

She was pressed against him, her face upturned so that he could swim in the depths of her bright brown eyes. "Now your arms about my neck. So! And your lips, sweet love—your lips to mine!"

With a squeal she kissed him hungrily, feeling his arms sweeping her off the floor, swinging her, banding her so tightly she found it hard to breathe. Love for this big man was a molten glory in her veins. It gave purpose to her life, to her every thought. Without him, she was nothing. Languidly she let the fire in her body sweep relentlessly forward, knowing she was drowning in its flames but willingly helpless to prevent it.

## Chapter Twelve

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THE THUMP of oars made rhythmic music in the night. Four wide jolly boats each holding upwards of twenty men moved across the surface of the Thames River with only faint swirls and gurgles to mark their passage. A quarter-moon was in the sky; Michael could see its reflection on the water as the jolly boat in which he sat surged forward. Meg crouched beside him, breathing softly.

The bulk of the *Devon Rose* grew larger by the moment. At first the ship only obscured the towers of St. Thomas's Hospital. Soon it hid the entire shoreline. As Black Mark whispered and the rowers lifted oars from water, it blotted out the sky.

Michael put out his hands, warding off the jolly boat from contact with the bulwark timbers of the big galleon. "No noise as you value your life," he muttered to the crew and swung free of the smallboat, beginning his climb upward with hands and bare toes stabbing for holds on channels and cat-heads. As he went up the ship's side he could hear the others mounting behind him.

His head lifted over a rail capping. The foredeck lay empty of life. The gentle swaying of the hull to the lift of the Thames caused the clapper of the poop-deck bell to sound against its side; it made a low, mournful sound and Michael wondered what fool had failed to secure the clapper thong. His arm waved out and upward in a beckoning motion as he swung a leg over the foredeck rail.

He moved through the shadows of foremast and bow rail to the companionway, down the treads and past the main deck cannon drawn up with their muzzles blindly aiming over-side. A light from the cabin drew him as if he were a moth.

The door stood open a little. As he came closer he heard the low mutter of voices.

His hand fumbled at his belt, bringing out a long-barreled pistol. He walked with the pistol held out ahead of him as a sightless man might hold a cane. He made no more noise than a shadow as his bare feet trod the deck planks. Then he was before the doorway, taking a deep breath.

Michael moved so swiftly he was inside the cabin before the three men looked up from their cards and into the muzzle of his snapper. They were wharfside louts, he saw; stupid, gross men in greasy shirts and ragged breeches. They gaped at him in dumb amazement.

"On your feet, all of you. Hurry it up!"

They rose, dropping cards and shillings in their haste. Michael permitted himself a taut smile. "I'll give you a choice. Jump overside and swim for it or come with us to Plymouth."

The men stared dumbly. One of them asked, "What be at Plymouth, m'lord?"

"It's where Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins mass good English ships to fight the Spanish."

There was a little silence. Then the largest of the three grinned almost lewdly. "I got me no mind to stay in London Town when I can get out of it so easy. There's a girl I know carryin' a baby she says is mine. I'm for signing up, m'lord."

"I'm not a lord. I'm your captain. You others?"

They shrugged. A man said, "What Henry does, we do. We'll sign up too."

Michael belted his pistol and stood aside. "Go find Black Mark, my first mate. Tell him to put you to work."

He followed them onto the deck, running a practiced eye over mainmast and foremast riggings, watching men scramble up the shrouds to the heavy yardarms to shake out the sails. Close by the foredeck capstan three sailors were preparing to lower the heavy anchor chain gently overside so as to not give an alarm by the necessary rattle of capstan bars involved in raising it.

"Jolly boats secured?" he asked Black Mark.

"All secured, Cap'n."

A breeze touched the Cornishman on the cheek. Instantly



his head was cocked; he seemed scarcely to breathe while he sniffed. "The air do have a touch of cold in it, sir. That means she's a true norther."

A north wind was a sailing wind. As the breeze freshened the sails bellied outward, fat and full as eager hands secured them at jackstays and running rigging. The *Devon Rose* surged ahead with a rush.

"I'll take the helm myself, Mark." He broke off when he saw a slim figure gliding toward him, then added, "With the cabin boy beside me to learn something of seamanship."

The Cornishman chuckled. "Learn first if she has sea legs, Cap'n. A weak stomach is no help in a sea fight."

Meg was breathless with excitement. Her eyes went this way and that, to mastheads and stays, as if she could not see enough. "Michael—oh, I love it! I never dreamed a ship could be so noble! How smoothly it glides. Already the bridge is more than a mile behind us."

"More than a mile astern, darling. Or aft."

"Those are seamen's terms, aren't they? I must remember. Astern or aft. Michael, you must teach me. You must!" He escorted her past the cannons, explaining, "These deck guns are eighteen-pounders. They're also called culverins. This is the poop-deck companionway or staircase. The ship is steered from a whipstaff hutch by means of a helm or tiller."

He brought her to the poop deck close by the stern lantern; here she could see the tiny cubicle in which the helmsman stood so that only his face and shoulders were above deck level. "Your left on shipboard is called port because that was the side on which a ship always docked in port, to avoid damage to the rudder or steerboard. Your right is starboard, from the old custom of hanging the steerboard or rudder over the stern on the right-hand side."

Meg said dutifully, "Astern. Aft. Port. Starboard. Oh, I am beginning to understand, aren't I?"

"Like a very Drake," he chuckled.

The *Devon Rose* seemed a ghost ship as she slid through the Thames waters past tiny hamlets on either bank where trees and open meadows stretched away northward to Essex farms and orchards or southward to Sussex Weald. She showed no riding lights. Michael was content with the soft watery

gurgled her prow made slicing through the river waters. The men went about their tasks quietly with only a low call passing between them from time to time.

"Where are we going, Michael?" Meg asked.

"To Plymouth Harbor, where Sir Francis Drake is collecting ships and men."

Meg frowned. "Drake? Lord Howard is Admiral of the Fleet."

"Drake is the finest seaman of the age, darling. He lies in Plymouth Sound with thirty ships waiting like hunting hounds for their leashes to be slipped. El Draque, as the Spanish call him, is known and feared in Spain. His name alone is worth half a dozen ships.

"It's true that Howard of Effingham has the title of admiral, but Drake and Hawkins are the fighting men, the seadogs. Howard lies at Queensborough, Drake at Plymouth. Sir Henry Palmer in the *Antelope*, with eight more galleons to his squadron, is patrolling the Thames-mouth waters. When I go into battle, I go with Drake." He smiled slowly, eyes dreaming. "The fiercest fighting is where he leads. It's an honor to sail with him."

A fog was rolling down from Essex. It came in long gray tendrils like searching fingers roving across woodland and marsh and out over the river waters to surround the silently gliding *Devon Rose*. Meg shivered and drew closer to Michael where he stood with a foot on the whipstaff hutch peering through the misting grayness. The night was growing cold and wet and Meg found that she was losing a little of her enthusiasm. Twice she shivered before Michael reached out an arm and drew her in against him to kiss her gently.

"The fog was made for lovers, angel. But a little of it may prove too much. Go below to my cabin and sleep awhile. When you wake we'll be quartering past the chalk cliffs of Dover."

Michael watched her walk away, then moved to the starboard rail to study the shoreline past which the galleon slid so quietly. His hand touched the rail capping and stroked it slowly, as if to reassure himself that he was once again on his way to sea in his own fine ship.

## ii.

The *Devon Rose* hove to in Plymouth Harbor on the outer edge of the vast fleet that lay at anchor in the sound. A jolly boat was despatched to locate an anchor. A second boat rowed to the *Revenge* where Vice-Admiral Sir Francis Drake commanded. Before the anchor was locked onto its chain, a message welcoming Captain Goddard to the fleet was being delivered to him by Black Mark.

"The admiral asks the pleasure of your company, Cap'n. Seems he's heard a few things about you."

"Good or bad?"

The Cornishman shrugged. "He didn't say. He just looks at me fierce-like without a smile and says calm as you please, 'It would give me great pleasure if Captain Goddard were to come in person with his compliments. See to it.' Just like that."

Michael turned to Meg. "I'll be back soon enough. I'll leave Mark here to care for you."

Michael was not as confident as he sounded. Worry was a voice inside his head. *Suppose the vice-admiral claps you in irons? You're still a fugitive from justice, Michael Goddard! Her Majesty has never pardoned you for the disloyalty of which you were accused.* His hand touched the belt purse that held his unsigned commission as he swung off the rope ladder to step into the smallboat. Could he bluff Sir Francis with it?

The *Revenge* was a five-hundred-ton ship. Not as large as the *Triumph*, the biggest English vessel and a forty-four-gun warship, the *Revenge* nevertheless looked fast and deadly to Michael's practiced gaze. He went up its rope ladder with the knowledge that he would fight for the right to go into battle beside such a vessel.

Sir Francis Drake was waiting in his stern cabin. He was a not unhandsome man with blond hair and pointed beard and a mustache that might have seemed affectation on another. His fine eyes regarded Michael almost indifferently as he advanced and made himself known.

Two men sat with Drake. One was John Hawkins, rough-hewn and grim of feature, his tawny hair making him look younger than his fifty-six years. Shrewdness and wit lay in

his craggy face; he wore his doublet unfastened in deference to the May heat, showing the linen shirt beneath it. The second man, slim and dark with eyes set close together, was a stranger to Michael.

"Captain Michael Goddard," repeated the vice-admiral slowly. "Before God, I can't believe it."

"You have a duty to clap him in irons, Sir Francis. The man's a proven traitor." The slim man looked like a fanatic with his dark eyes and black hair, as he stood and pointed.

Michael said softly, "No one can ever prove such a charge against me. I'm as loyal as Lord Howard himself." His hand tapped his belt purse. "I bear the Queen's commission."

A curious look touched Sir Francis's face, blended of amusement and concern. He rose to his feet and came around the edge of the table, hand extended. "Let me see this commission, Captain Goddard."

Michael held out the parchment. Drake unrolled and read it slowly, the corners of his lips twitching. Michael thought, He holds my fate in his hands at this moment. Either I lose everything I've fought for or I win a chance to strike a blow for England. His heart pounded wildly under the spray-stained leather jerkin.

The dark man stood and held out his hand. "May I see the commission too, Sir Francis?"

Drake rolled up the parchment slowly. "I think not, Craydon. It's sufficient that it exists and that my own eyes have read it. If I begin with you, every ship's officer in the fleet will feel called upon to pass on its validity."

To Michael the vice-admiral said, "I take it that you won that commission by offering Her Majesty some token of your loyalty?"

"I would have except for chance." He went on to speak of his activities as Captain Seadog. Drake and Hawkins listened in fascinated silence, but the lean, dark man was flushed with fury. Twice he went to interrupt only to have Drake silence him.

At last he could not be restrained. "Sir Francis, I beg leave to retire. This tale of thievery and murder turns my stomach."

Drake was placid. "I give you permission to go, Craydon. I also give you permission to get in touch with Lord Crofts

and inform him that Captain Seadog has taken refuge with me. Tell him also he bears a commission from the Queen. That will hold Crofts, I think."

Craydon stamped out. The cabin door slammed behind him.

John Hawkins looked grave. "You may be making a mistake, Francis. Crofts is a powerful minister, high in Elizabeth's estimation."

"Not so high that she listens to his advice to placate Philip, to pay him tribute monies and so turn the threat of his Armada away from our shores. No, no. England needs every fighting man she can lay claim to at the moment. I list Captain Seadog in that company. Everything he's done has been for the good of our country. The men he's killed have been the traitors."

Sir Francis held out his hand. "Welcome to the fleet, Captain Goddard. Return to your ship. I'll keep you aware of our plans. Until our next meeting, ready your *Devon Rose* for battle." He hesitated, then said blandly, "If anything should happen to that document you showed me, be at ease. I have read it. I will vouch for its contents."

Michael fought the inclination to grin. He bowed and left the room with the warm satisfaction of knowing he had made a friend in Sir Francis Drake.

It was dusk when Michael stood in his stern cabin, holding his unsigned commission above a candle flame. As it burned, he watched with something of relief in his heart.

"Drake as good as told me to destroy it," he informed Meg.

"But why?"

"It bears no signature. When Lord Howard arrives he might ask to read it. As Lord Admiral, Howard outranks Sir Francis. He couldn't refuse him as he refused Sir Thomas Craydon. If I cannot produce it—I'll explain that a small fire in my cabin cost me a few personal documents, among them my commission—it makes no difference. Sir Francis read it and was satisfied. Lord Howard will have no reason to disbelieve him."

Meg laughed. "It smacks of trickery to me."

"Craydon will contact Crofts. Crofts will contact Lord Howard. Both Craydon and Crofts are members of the Span-



ish party, I'll warrant. You understand? We fight treachery with trickery, and who's to say we're not justified?"

"Not I, darling!" she cried and threw her arms about him. "One kiss and then dinner——"

"It's called mess on shipboard, wench."

"Mess, then."

Michael held her when she would have moved away. "And after that? Tonight in our cabin? Just you and I?"

"I'll light your pipe and fetch your slippers as any good cabin boy should, Captain."

"You wouldn't be a cabin boy if you didn't wear breeches and jersey."

Meg wrinkled her nose at him. "We'll have to find a way to lose them, darling. For the night, at least."

Michael sighed happily.

~ *iii.*

It was the middle of May, 1588.

Seven hundred miles south of Plymouth, in the great harbor of Lisbon, one hundred and thirty ships stowed anchors and unfurled their sails. Flying the tower of Castile and the lions of Aragon, the pride of Spain moved past Cape Mondego and pointed their prows northward. Earlier that morning—it was a Sunday—Prince Cardinal Vivey of Portugal, nephew of His Majesty Philip II, had prayed over and blessed this vast fleet the Spaniards called the Grande Armada Felicisma. The man who commanded it was Don Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, Duke of Medina Sidonia, Earl of Niobla and Marquis of Cacaca in Africa. On his shoulders rested the hopes and ambitions of his King.

After his ships had been at sea a week, Don Alonso Pérez de Guzmán discovered to his horror that there was an astounding lack of water on board his vessels. He put in to Corunna with his flagship and such other vessels as saw him veer off course to refill his casks.

The rest of the Armada sailed on without him.

A great wind blew in Corunna that night. It did tremendous damage to the proud galleons resting at their anchors.

It cost the Duke of Medina Sidonia four precious weeks to refit and repair his shattered vessels.

The balance of the fleet was hove to at the Scilly Islands, wondering what had become of its Grand Admiral. Lookouts scanned the gray waves of the Atlantic with harassed faces, dreading to see El Draque in his *Revenge* come quartering down on them.

Sir Francis Drake was an angry man.

His revolutionary plan of naval warfare, which was to seek out the enemy rather than wait for the enemy to come to him, had at long last been approved by Queen and Council. As a result, on May 30, the English fleet sailed from Plymouth to find Philip's vessels. By June 9 they were back at harbor anchor again, having encountered southerly gales and mountainous seas which made navigation so hazardous as to be foolhardy. And so Sir Francis raged and fretted.

There were to be more delays to annoy him, caused by a failure of supplies. There was no food and scant hope of getting any. Howard cursed along with Drake and wrote angry letters to the Queen in which he poured out his frustration of spirit.

On June 19 the English fleet went to sea again; once more they had to put back into Plymouth because of the fierce gales. The only consolation Howard and Drake had from this second delay was the arrival of the supply ships, heavily laden.

A third attempt was made to leave Plymouth on June 23; the gales blew more fiercely than before.

Michael Goddard alone was content with fate.

"The same winds that keep us from the Spanish keep them away from us. Let them blow. They mean I can have you with me a little longer, Meg my love."

They were at their ease in the big bunk of the stern cabin with only a tallow candle to light the naked body of the woman as she lay half atop the captain and kissed him slowly. "A honeymoon, my darling. We have each other and who wants any more?"

In mid-July Don Alonso Pérez de Guzmán effected a rendezvous with Don Pedro de Valdéz, his second in command,

some miles south of The Lizard, a craggy headland on the southern coast of Cornwall. When news reached the *Revenge* that the Spaniards had been sighted approaching England, El Draque damned the winds and Lord Howard ordered anchors up.

The two fleets made first contact in a thick mist that lay like white smoke on the heaving channel waters. The Spaniards were drawn up in crescent formation. Their gunners stood to their touchholes with lighted tapers all that long afternoon, but the English stayed aloof. When night fell the Spanish lookouts could see riding lights moving back and forth along the coast as if the English ships were dogs prowling before a precious bone.

All night long the lights moved while the Spaniards watched in fascination. The Duke of Medina Sidonia smiled to himself and reflected that the reputation of El Draque was vastly overrated. When morning came the Spanish would move to the attack. There had been enough delays!

Dawn revealed only eight vessels before the Armada.

"A decoy!" roared Don Alonso.

The English fleet was behind him, looming up in a long straight line with the rising sun on its starboard beam. Somehow they had slid past the Spanish vessels in the mists the day before and moved seaward to veer around in the shelter of darkness and come up on their rear.

There was no time for further thought. Following the green-and-white bulk of the *Revenge*, the English ships began pouring broadside after broadside at the Spanish galleons. Panic spread through the Armada. The rearguard jammed in close to the first line of vessels, ruining what little chance the duke might have had to maneuver.

The *Devon Rose* followed in the wake of the 36-gun galleon the *Swiftsure*, with the smaller *Elizabeth Bonaventure* astern. Michael was on the gundeck with his crewmen, sighting a culverin, roaring up the powder kegs, trying to peer through gunsmoke and haze to see the red-and-gold bulwarks of his targets. There was time for three heavy broadsides before he found himself sliding out of range.

Lord Howard dared not risk a general engagement with one third of his fleet missing and with some ships under-

manned because of a spread of sickness at Plymouth. He contented himself with heavy broadsides and disengaged to await the arrival of the squadron commanded by Sir Henry Palmer and Lord Henry Seymour.

Lord Howard explained his motives at a council of war on board his galleon *Ark Royal*. "We've disabled one of their biggest ships, the *San Juan*, and battered a few others. They will be at wits' end wondering what trick we'll play on them next. The race is not always to the swift, gentlemen."

Sir Francis Drake commended Michael on the way he fought his ship as they walked across the deck of the *Ark Royal* to their waiting smallboats. "It explains how you amassed the great treasure men say you did. A man who was not both master mariner and master gunner could not have done it."

Michael spoke of Sir Thomas Craydon. "I didn't see his bark in the line."

"Craydon went back to London in a fit of pique to join Sir Henry Seymour. We may or may not see him again, depending on what's done with Sir Henry's squadron."

For two days the fleets lay watchful of each other, Lord Howard waiting reinforcements in face of the vast flotilla flying the Spanish flag, the Duke of Medina Sidonia attempting to lure the English into making a tactical mistake. The Spaniards could not match the English cannon fire; their hope was to board and so carry the fight to their decks.

Michael explained these battle tactics to Meg as the *Devon Rose* fell into line behind John Hawkins in his *Victory*. "Our own strategy depends on raking the Spaniards with enough shot to put them out of commission. Sir Francis developed the tactics we used two days ago. We form a long line and sail past the enemy vessels, each ship letting go with every gun available. As one of our ships slides out of range another slides into range. It lessens the damage to any one ship and permits the gun crews to give everything they've got in one short, sustained effort."

The English fleet was moving to the attack once more, Lord Howard being well aware that to do nothing was to play the Spanish game. He must hit the Armada again and again

or see it effect a junction with the Duke of Parma and the Spanish army.

The *Devon Rose* was almost within range of the assembled Spanish ships. Forward of her beak, the *Victory* was already on the attack, men crouched over its culverins, her starboard side roaring with explosions of red flame and white smoke.

Slowly the *Victory* moved on.

"Stand by, guns!" Michael roared from his poop rail.

"Prepare to fire!"

The *Devon Rose* was closing with a rush, alert and responsive to the bellying sails at foremast and mainmast, to the swing of her big wooden rudder. Michael knew pride in his ship at that moment. Even Meg, who stood so close her elbow touched his ribs, was forgotten.

"Fire!"

A sheet of flame ran from the guns. A big galleass shuddered as those iron balls drove into her. Across the lifting waters of the channel Michael could hear the screams of wounded men.

"Reload starboard cannon!"

A swab crew was already cleaning the barrels of the big guns. Powder monkeys came running with their kegs. The kegs were tilted and glossy black gunpowder flowed. Iron cannon balls were lifted in small canvas strips and rolled into muzzles. Lighted tapers hovered over touchholes.

"Prepare to fire! Fire!"

The *Devon Rose* heeled over in answer to that broadside.

Michael was off the poop deck, moving behind the culverins, gaging wind and tide and distance. With his own hands he snatched a keg and tipped it. He sighted the guns; gestured to the lighted tapers.

"Fire again!"

The explosion of sound deafened him. He rocked back on his heels as he watched the culverins strain against their ropes in the fury of their recoil.

"One more! Look lively! We've room for one more!"

The *Elizabeth Jonas*, Sir Robert Southwell commanding, was astern of him and moving up fast, as anxious to get in on the fight as Michael was reluctant to leave it. Michael's voice whipped his men into motion, held them at their tasks.



"Roll those balls. Look lively! Prepare to fire!"

The Spanish galleass was rocking in the trough of a wave. One heavy cannonade and she might go down. Michael aimed two of the eighteen-pounders himself. His hand waved and the touchhole sparked.

"Did we hit?" he shouted at Black Mark, who was clinging to the shrouds with a hand and a knee the better to see through the wind-swept gunsmoke. "Did we hit?"

"Square amidships, Cap'n! She lists to port."

They caught the cheers from the *Elizabeth Jonas* as she followed the *Devon Rose* into action. With the gunsmoke behind them they could see the big red-and-gilt galleass listing badly. Men were leaping from the decks into the gray waters. The slave rowers were screaming for someone to come and unlock the manacles that held them to the oar grips.

Lord Howard in his *Ark Royal* was leading the line of English ships, closely followed by Sir John Hawkins's *Victory*, but Howard was falling off to leeward despite every effort. Rather than take the risk of running aground on the shallows south of Portland Bill, he veered off and disengaged. At that moment lookouts informed the Lord, Admiral that Martin Frobisher's *Triumph* and his little fleet of five ships were fighting for their lives against a greater number of Spanish. As third in line, Michael ordered the *Devon Rose* to join in the attempt to reach the ships around the *Triumph*. The *Revenge* swung in to help them.

The four ships bore down on the Spanish vessels prow to stern with every gun ablaze. The *Ark Royal* rammed between two galleons with port and starboard cannon blazing. Hawkins took the *Victory* in on her heels. The *Devon Rose* and the *Revenge* veered to starboard and began hammering a path between two big galleasses crowded to their rail cappings with Spanish soldiery.

There was no pause now to stand and stare at whatever damage they might be doing. It was clean and load and fire, clean again and reload. Men baked in their own sweat under the hot July sun, powder-marked and grimy. Their bare feet felt the lift and heave of the deck planks, the shudder from rudderpost to beak as the *Devon Rose* absorbed the tremendous recoil of the guns.

It was hot, stifling work where the body was everything and the mind nothing. A man could not think down here on the main deck with everything an explosion of sound and white gunsmoke wind-blown across the rails. His hands moved and his muscles cracked with strain and his back bent over, but he never thought. And through the din and the smoke there was the voice of the captain urging him on to greater speed.

"Powder monkeys, this way! Prepare to load. Swabbers—get a move on! Load! Prepare to fire—"

Then abruptly they were out of the fight, sliding through a clean sea with the battle behind them and exhaustion in their muscles. Michael leaned into the taffrail above the great rudder, spyglass to his eye. He caught the immense bulk of the *Triumph*—she was England's largest vessel—as Martin Frobisher brought her safely out of the action.

The second battle ended by mutual consent. The English were short of powder and cannon balls; the Spanish vessels were unable to close and board. A few of the Spanish ships had been badly battered by the English broadsides, but the great bulk of the fleet was intact and unharmed.

Lord Howard called a meeting of his ship commanders in the stern cabin of the *Ark Royal*. Worry made furrows on his high forehead. Even his white beard seemed to bristle as he looked about the crowded cabin at his officers.

"We've had two fights with Philip's ships and they're hardly the worse off for them," he said slowly. "It's vital to England that we smash them before Medina Sidonia can make contact with the Duke of Parma at Calais. As you know, Parma commands the Spanish army now encamped in the Netherlands. Once they effect a junction, they intend to move on England to land troops and march inland.

"Against such an invasion force we have two armies, one of twenty thousand men under Leicester, the second of little more than ten under Hunsden. These men are not trained, professional soldiers like the Spanish. They're farmers and smiths, craftsmen and merchants, volunteering their lives to defend their homeland.

"Gentlemen, this battle must be won at sea.

"Can we win such a battle? Remember, our victory must

be total. All the Spanish need do is meet Parma and cross the channel at Calais to land the overwhelmingly powerful Spanish army at or near Dover.

"I ask for suggestions from my captains."

Voices broke out in every corner of the cabin. Michael was frowning thoughtfully from the bulkhead where he leaned close by Sir Francis himself. When Drake saw him scowling so blackly he clapped him on the shoulder and whispered in his ear.

"What would Captain Seadog do, Goddard?"

Michael smiled grimly. "Seadog was so used to being outnumbered he had to call on fortune and circumstance to help his fighting. Once he used water in which to hide Spanish party gold. Another time— Ah, yes!"

"Well? Well? What did he use?"

"Fire, my lord! Can't you see? Fire!"

Drake whistled softly. A moment longer he stood with pursed lips and narrowed eyes before he rose and began pushing his way through the other captains, gesturing Michael to follow. In front of the big desk where the Lord Admiral sat he brought Michael forward with a hand at his elbow.

"Here's your answer, Howard. Go on, Captain. Make your suggestion."

"Fireboats, Your Grace. *Brûlots!* Flaming destruction floated in among the massed Spanish ships. There are so many—with a strong wind they'll go up like tinder. They'll scatter like sheep before a wolf. When they do we'll hit them."

Lord Howard whispered, "Fire! God's my life!"

The other officers were crowding forward, some of them clapping hands to Michael's back, gleefully seconding his thought. Frobisher was there suddenly, dark and brooding in black doublet trimmed in silver cloth, and John Hawkins, all piercing eyes and blond beard.

"The lad's hit it, sire!"

"*Brûlots* will do the trick."

"Medina Sidonia will faint when he sees them!"

A roar of laughter drove Lord Howard into raising his hands. He smiled as he said, "Enough, you fire-eaters. Get back to your boats. Leave Drake and Hawkins with me to

plan the details. And you, Captain Goddard—I think we'd do well to have your wits beside us as we lay our plans."

It was Michael who suggested the use of pinnaces, small sailing vessels, for the fireboats. "They must handle well for a skeleton crew, yet be large enough not to burn up before they reach the Spaniards. Smaller dories would not have their staying powers."

"Agreed," nodded Drake.

And so they laid their plans, with only the proper time and moment for the attack yet to settle. Captain Goddard himself would command one brûlot, since he asked the privilege. Command of the others would be meted out as the Lord Admiral saw fit.

#### iv.

Off the Isle of Wight the following day the fleets again made contact. The *Victory* closed with the *San Luis*, the *Ark Royal* and *Golden Lion* joining her. The *San Luis* was reinforced in its lone battle and the engagement became general. When it was broken off in late afternoon not a single ship was sunk though a number on each side had been roughly handled.

More than ever Lord Howard became convinced that fireboats were the answer to his problem. The Armada was too big and unwieldy for the lesser number of English ships to smash conclusively in a sea battle. The English tactics were so revolutionary in nature and so prodigal of cannon balls and gunpowder kegs that their ships could not be supplied with enough of either to bring about a final verdict.

Rain came down heavily on Friday morning, the twenty-sixth day of July, 1588. The Spanish fleet lay anchored in Calais harbor, the English some miles west and southward. Though the weather cleared, the air was still too damp to consider using fireboats. The English swing their vessels to their anchors, fully aware that the Duke of Parma was marching his army toward Calais to effect a meeting with the Armada but helpless to prevent it.

By sundown the weather began to clear. Early Saturday

morning Lord Howard sent a fast pinnace to Thames-mouth to summon Sir Lord Henry Seymour and his channel squadron to join forces with him before Calais. An air of feverish expectancy swept the fleet. It was time now for the final move.

Under cover of darkness a number of pinnaces were cleared of their gear in preparation for the pitch and faggots expected by fishing smacks from Dover. Michael Goddard supervised the placement of the materials, the spreading of the thick black pitch on deck planks and bulkhead timbers. Captains Young and Prouse were detailed to assist him.

It was well into Sunday afternoon before Michael was satisfied with his task. Five ships lay smeared with pitch from bilge boards to topmasts and piled high with faggots. As the sun lowered beyond the cliffs of Dover a cool darkness shrouded the coast of Picardy.

There was no moon.

Michael paced the deck of his small ship, occasionally moistening a forefinger and holding it to gauge the wind. Everything was so ready, so perfect for the undertaking. If only the wind would freshen, to speed the brûlots on their way and fan the flames to their fullest fury.

The hours after sundown stretched out endlessly.

"Blow, damn you—blow!" he whispered.

It was midnight when he felt the first gust against his cheek. He took off his velvet cap and savored its salty tang, exultation singing in his blood.

"Light torches belowdecks!" he shouted.

A nearby pinnace swung broadside on, bumping against his own vessel. Two men came leaping over her rails, shouting that the Lord Admiral had sent them to see that all went well. Michael paid them no heed; he was too concerned about the proper firing of the bilge boards. He ran for the companion-way.

Men with lanterns were moving back and forth belowdecks. A few of them held lighted torches, swirling them twice overhead to fan the blaze before casting them onto the faggots. Michael joined them; caught up a torch himself and flung it with a muttered, "For Meg and England!"

The fire was going nicely. Wherever he looked the flames



came leaping red and tall, licking at pitch-smeared timbers and eating across the heaped branches.

"On deck," he ordered. "Everyone on deck."

He went for one last look around. Satisfied, he was turning away from the roaring flames when he caught sight of a sudden movement out of the corner of his eye. He swung about.

Sir Edmund Morton stood facing him, grinning cruelly.

It was not Morton who most concerned him at the moment, but Sir Thomas Craydon, for Craydon was driving sideways at him, a belaying pin lifted high above his head. As he instinctively ducked to elude that length of wood, he heard Sir Edmund laugh aloud.

"I get my revenge at last, Goddard! You'll die here this night with none except Craydon and myself to know the manner of your going—"

The belaying pin struck hard and he went down.

He was unconscious before he hit the planks.

# Chapter Thirteen

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THE HEAT was unimaginable.

To the man who lay helpless on the deck boards the fire was a red monster advancing with incredible speed, roaring and lashing crimson tails, thrusting its thousand tongues outward to devour him. He tried to stir and could not. His head was a mass of agony. His muscles were paralyzed. The body that he knew so well remained inert, incapable of movement.

Sweat was a wetness all over him. "God's life!" he moaned, head rolling from side to side. "I must get up. I must move before it's too late."

The crash of falling timbers jarred him. The forward section was caving in, sending a sea of fire shooting upward.

He rolled over. The deck boards were hot to his cheeks. Pain raced throughout his body as he rose to hands and knees. For a moment his body swayed weakly and his head swam in a wave of agony; he was certain he would collapse. But his muscles held and he dragged hot air into his lungs.

"I've got to make it to my feet," he whispered. "Must manage to stand."

The heat was a soporific. It cradled him, made him think that it would be easier to fall forward and let death overtake him. Against that laxity of will he had to fight more savagely than against any of the Spanish party members.

Twice he almost fainted, but at last he stood erect, aware that the companionway to the upper deck was a solid sheet of fire. But there was nowhere else to run if he hoped to stay alive. The treads would have to support his weight; if they did not, he would die.

He tried to run but only stumbled forward, staggering. The heat was monstrous. It sapped strength and will together.

Michael flung an arm about his face and lunged forward. His booted feet advanced on the flaming companionway. It was now or never. Plunge forward and fight for a chance to live. Or fall back and let the flames consume him.

The first tread held, and the second. Holding his breath, he mounted slowly, steadily. Once his foot went through a companionway tread, but the next was firm and then the night wind was cool on his arm. Recklessly he hurled himself forward to collapse across a section of the upper deck which was as yet untouched by the fire.

His lungs were grateful to the cool air. He breathed deeply and some of the pain inside him went away. Now it did not hurt quite so much to rise to his feet. With wondering eyes he saw that the ship was almost on the rim of the Spanish fleet. Ships were bumping together on all sides, trying to avoid the forward slide of the blazing pinnace. To port another fireboat was sliding between a galleass and galleon. Flames were leaping onto sails and rigging. Men screamed in terror. To starboard the three other brûlots were scattering among the anchored Spanish ships.

It was a scene from nightmare.

The Armada broke its defensive formation for the first time.

Towering galleons bumped smaller caravels. A row of oars on a big galleass splintered when a ship veered too close. Cables were cut. Anchor chains splashed, freed from their ring stoppers. Below the flames was the dark, heaving water, waiting to trap those who leaped.

Michael waited no longer. He staggered toward the starboard rail, kicking off his jackboots. His doublet came next and then his trunk hose. He was naked except for a linen undergarment when he stepped onto the rail and dove outward.

The cold waters closed around him. He went down and down, and now he fought a different kind of danger. The coolness felt good on his scorched skin. It would be easy to lose himself in these murky depths. Death was not such a grievous thing. It would bring peace and an end to the pain of mind and body in which he moved.

Meg! I must stay alive for Meg!

He began to fight the sea, using arms and legs in a frantic struggle. Then he moved away from the dark depths, upward

to the surface and the cool, fresh air. Thanks to the blazing boats, he could see far across the water toward the Picardy coast where the English fleet was waiting. Michael swam. He soon tired, however; then he floated, looking up at the black sky flecked here and there with stars.

When he felt strength returning he swam again.

The water seemed to stretch on forever. No matter how long he moved his arms and kicked his legs he appeared to make no headway through the waves. Tiredness ate in him. It hurt more and more to swim.

Sound touched his ears.

He paused, treading water, listening. There it was again, the sound made by oars thumping in their locks.

"Hoy," he cried out weakly. A little louder he called, "This way. This way."

A smallboat loomed in the darkness, painted red by the fire flames. An instant before his senses left him he saw Meg crouched in its bow with Black Mark beside her peering through the gloom. There was a splash and then a hand in back of his neck, supporting him. He revived enough to know it was the Cornishman beside him in the water.

Hands reached out from the smallboat, lifting and steadying him. Meg bent to smooth wet hair away from his forehead, crying softly in relief.

"We worried when you didn't return. I made Black Mark come searching——"

"We saw you mount to the pinnacle deck, Cap'n! We held our breaths, hopin' you could make it into the water."

"Sir Edmund," he whispered. "He came on board unnoticed. He and Craydon attacked me below decks. A belaying pin——"

He slept.

## ii.

Michael awoke in his cabin bunk naked between cool sheets. Meg was on the edge of the bed, smiling wistfully. His hand touched and captured her fingers. Michael felt the lift

and surge of the ship and knew that the sails were fat with wind. Sunlight angled in through the stern windows.

His eyebrows arched. "Where away?"

"To Plymouth, darling. The Armada has been shattered, thanks to your fireboats."

Meg wanted him to be silent, to conserve his strength; Michael wanted to learn every detail of the sea fight. They compromised, with Meg sitting and feeding him broth and biscuit and then sending for Black Mark.

The Cornishman was eager to talk. While Michael propped himself on an elbow his first mate said, "It was the brûlots as did it, Cap'n. Scattered the Spanishers every which way up and down the coast. Come Monday morning, the royal standard went up on the *Ark Royal* to signal the attack.

"Cor! It was a sweet sight to see, wi' Sir Francis Drake in close to shore an' Sir John Hawkins—Lord Howard made him an' Sir Thomas Howard knights the other morning, wi' a few others—next beside him."

"The *Devon Rose*? Was she in on it?"

"Aye, she were. Close-hauled behind the *Revenge*, wi' Sir Francis insisting we be given our chance because it were your suggestion about the fireboats as gave us our chance to whip 'em in the first place." Black Mark looked modest. "Beggin' yer pardon, Cap'n, but 'er ladyship said I was to act in your place—"

"Which he did, with honor," smiled Meg.

Michael nodded soberly. "Go on, man!"

"Sir Francis were a regular whirlwind, sir. He was 'ere and there an' everywhere, keeping the Spanishers from reachin' deep water, exchangin' shot wi' the *San Martín*, forcin' the galleons back onto the Dunkirk banks.

"Where the *Revenge* went, the *Devon Rose* went too.

"Ar! Like a shadow to the *Revenge* we were. Firin' broadsides when they fired 'em, heaving to when Drake hove to, tacking when he tacked. We ran some of them big galleons into shoal water and crippled others. Right along the coast we fought 'em, past Gravelines in the Netherlands until we were almost opposite the Goodwin Sands."

Michael leaned into his pillow, smiling faintly. "Good man, Mark. The honor's all yours."

Meg laughed. "There's honor enough for all, I think. Many ships sunk, many taken as prizes. Even more would have been won except for a squall that came up."

Black Mark nodded. "Aye, sir. We had to look to ourselves then to keep from being capsized. The Spanishers took advantage of the wind to run for it, risking their bottoms on the Zeeland shallows rather than face our cannons any longer."

"When was all this? How long have I lain here?"

"The battle was fought on Monday. It's late Tuesday afternoon now. You lay unconscious through it all. Sir Francis sent his own surgeon to bandage you. He said you needed rest, so we did all we could to see you got it. In a day or two you'll be as good as ever."

"The Armada? Where is it now?"

The Cornishman answered, "Saved by a wind off the shoals and fled north around Scotland, more'n likely."

Michael nodded, content. The Armada was a terror from the past. He had more personal affairs to concern him now. When Black Mark left the cabin he signaled Meg to come and sit beside him.

"When we anchor in Plymouth harbor there's a church I want to visit, Meg my love. You'll come with me, if you will. I have something I want to put into your hands."

He would say no more though she teased and cajoled. After a little while she saw the lines of strain on his face and, leaning over, kissed his eyes to sleep.

### *iii.*

The sun was high in the August sky as Michael Goddard escorted Lady Margaret Sutton across the cobblestoned square that fronted the Friary of St. Martin of Tours. From Plymouth they had come in her family coach from Shoreham House, where he had delivered her the night he saved her from the Spanish party street toughs. How long ago that night seemed; how very much had happened in the intervening year and a half!

He said something of this as they mounted the stone steps toward the graystone chapel. Michael Goddard spoke wist-



fully, for there was a core of sadness in him. Soon now he would be cutting himself off forever from his Meg. No longer would she be his cabin boy in jersey and breeches, no longer the noblewoman conspiring with him against the now-defunct Spanish party. Instead she was a duchess and lady in waiting to the Queen.

As for himself: well, he would outfit the *Devon Rose* and put to sea again to prey on Spanish shipping. The Armada was almost forgotten, her ships blown to destruction on the west coast of Ireland by a storm; but Spain still offered a man a chance to gather riches by feasting on her plate ships homeward bound from the Caribbean.

"Come with me to London, Michael," she had begged. "Her Majesty will wish to honor you for everything you've done. Lord Howard will have described your attack with the brûlots, but Elizabeth will want to hear the story from your own lips."

"Nay, Meg. To linger longer will make the parting even more sorrowful than it must be. One last trip I ask you to take with me, to the old St. Martin's Friary. After that we kiss one another farewell."

Michael was pacing the study of Shoreham House while he spoke. From its leaded windows he could see the stone bulk of The Citadel built by Henry VIII, and the green bowling lawns beside The Hoe. He stood a moment, staring southward.

"One last task remains. After that we'll never see each other again. It's better that way. Can't you see that?"

Lady Margaret stamped her slippered foot in vexation, but he would not yield to her pleas for common sense. Now they walked the last few steps before the chapel, her arm linked with his.

"But why come here?" she asked. "What can interest you so much in a friary church?"

Michael chuckled. "You'll know when you see."

They were so concerned with one another that neither saw Sir Edmund Morton moving up the stair behind them. Only when he called out as they stood before the great oaken doors of the chapel did they turn and stare.

"You've led me a fine chase in your carriage, you two," Morton said. "But at last we're met again, so—on to our busi-

ness. There's a little alleyway behind the friary grounds, Captain Goddard. More than one duel's been fought there. You carry your blade. I brought mine, as well. Shall we settle our differences finally, as gentlemen?"

Meg cried out against it, but Michael smiled and nodded. "Indeed we shall, Sir Edmund. I've been meaning to come hunting you. My thanks for saving me the trouble."

They were almost affable, walking side by side with Lady Margaret, but the hate each man bore to the other stood out in their eyes and grim lips.

Sir Edmund exclaimed with admiration in his voice. "You're more of a hero than ever. I'm honestly glad. Killing you will be sweet syrup to my soul. Stab me if it won't!"

Lady Margaret said curtly, "When Her Majesty learns of this she'll be furious, Sir Edmund."

His smile was bitter. "No more furious than she is already. Sir Thomas Craydon is dead, but before he died he told Lord Henry Seymour of his part in leaving you to die in the flaming brûlot, Captain. Naturally he had to implicate me. I was with him. You can understand there isn't much future left for me in England. I'll cross the channel and take service with Wilmoughby against Parma and the Spanish."

They walked beside a high stone wall. Suddenly Morton stopped and gestured at a recessed iron grille gate. "The old gardens are inside, where the monks used to walk and say their beads before Henry changed his faith. No one ever comes here any more except a few duelists to settle their scores."

Rusty hinges creaked protest as Sir Edmund thrust his weight against the bars; the door opened inward, revealing narrow paths bordered by tangles of overgrown weeds and uncultivated flowers run wild from neglect. A great stone cross stood in the geometrical center of the garden, carved with stone tracery in the Celtic manner.

Sir Edmund led the way toward a larger path which had been cleared, after a fashion, of most of its bordering underbrush. He glanced around, nodding. "This will do, I believe. There's even an old bench where Lady Margaret can sit at her ease while I kill you."

Michael paused with his blade half drawn. "Morton, you're

a fool. I killed Calverly in fair duel. Are you a better swordsman than he?"

Sir Edmund laughed grimly. "I'm accounted more than middling fair with the steel." His face darkened. "I made my try at killing you on the fireboat. It didn't work. I can't stay in England. I've lost my lands and fortune, thanks to Craydon. One thing remains before I run. My personal affair with you."

Michael shook his head. "Surely a pistol ball in the night—a dagger from an alleyway's shadow—"

"I had no time to make a search for you, Captain. By luck I saw you leave Plymouth in the Sunderland coach. Until that moment I had no idea where you were in England and no monies to spare to find out. No, this is a spur-of-the-moment challenge. Enough of talk; agreed? On guard, then—"

He rushed even as he spoke, and Michael was hard put for a moment to parry his savage thrusts. Lady Margaret cried out at his trickery, but Sir Edmund only smiled more bitterly and drove himself as with a whip, forward, always forward, until Michael felt the touch of underbrush behind his knees.

The blades flew back and forth. Steel rang with a sharp clear sound in the late afternoon sunlight. Thrust and parry, counterthrust and riposte, made the garden come alive to the stamp of feet and the hoarse breathing of angry men.

Sir Edmund was reckless. Twice steel drew blood from thigh and chest, but his wounds merely goaded him on. The feeling came to Michael that Sir Edmund Morton was choosing this way to die and making Michael Goddard his murderer.

At last Michael stepped back. "Milord, I think you're using me as an instrument of death."

Morton laughed harshly, panting, his sword naked in a fist. "Come on, man! We haven't done with one another yet. You want me dead. Come kill me! No? Then I'll kill you, damn your—"

Sir Edmund rushed. Michael side-stepped. Unable to halt his forward momentum, Sir Edmund stumbled off the path. Tangled underbrush caught his knees, held them, making him pitch forward blindly.

The great stone cross rose up before his falling body. His

head struck against the base, at an angle. There was a sickening sound as his neck cracked.

When Michael knelt over him there was no pulsebeat. Sighing, he glanced up at Meg. "He's dead. He came here to die. He got what he wanted." Michael rose and stared down. There was no emotion in him at all, unless it might be pity. The desire for vengeance that had been in him so long was gone; it was as if that night aboard the flaming pinnacle in the midst of the Spanish fleet had purged his mind of hate.

"I feel sorry for him," he said to Meg wonderingly.

"Come away," she whispered. "This garden is an evil place."

For the first time Michael noticed the brown stains to be glimpsed here and there on path and bench where men had fought their duels and died. A cold ripple moved down his spine. He brought her beside him to the rusted gate and through it along the narrow walk leading toward the side door of the friary. His hand was tight on her fingers where they held his forearm.

"Michael?" she asked softly.

"Yes, Meg?"

"Is that why you brought me here this day? To see you fight Sir Edmund?"

"Can you honestly think that of me? No, no. I didn't know Morton was within a hundred miles of Plymouth. We're here for another reason, my dear. Come through this side door into the chapel."

The interior of the church was dim and hushed. Sunlight filtered through the colored windowpanes, staining aisle and pew benches in tiny red and blue mosaics. It was not on these tiny dots of brilliance that Lady Margaret stared, however, but rather at the hundreds and hundreds of ships that crowded the interior.

"Michael! Oh, Michael, I've never seen anything like it."

"There are ship models here over two hundred years old, Meg. It's a sailor's chapel, this. Or it used to be, long ago. As long as my father and his father before him can remember, ship captains have come here with models of their vessels, hanging them from rafters and walls and praying for the intercession of good St. Martin that they have a safe voyage."

They walked together down the middle aisle, glancing from a medieval cog with raised fore- and stern-castles to a miniature galleon that was the exact duplicate of Henry VIII's *Henri Grace à Dieu*.

"My *Devon Rose* hangs here, chained in place with my own hands the night before I sailed to the New World. Over here, beyond the big cog. You see it?"

Her eyes had learned much seamanship in the past few weeks, Lady Margaret was discovering. She was able to pick out a galleon-type ship with four masts expressly built for warfare, a galleass and a pinnace. Yet search as her eyes would, she could not find the *Devon Rose*. Even when Michael stood before an eight-foot-long ship model and pointed at it, she shook her head dubiously.

"It doesn't look at all like the *Devon Rose*, Michael."

"This is the original *Devon Rose*, the English ship in which I sailed from Plymouth to the Spanish Main. She sank in a running sea fight off Cap François. The *Devon Rose* you know is the Spanish ship I captured in that fight, the old *Encarnación*. I made a few changes in its superstructure, painted her black, and now she's as English as the Queen herself."

Michael found a ladder and mounted, unhooking the ship model from the chains that held her suspended. The miniature vessel was so heavy Michael had to struggle to ease it down the ladder to the floor. As Lady Margaret stepped closer she could see three small caskets reposing inside its hollow hull.

Wonderingly she glanced at Michael, who was wiping his moist forehead on a linen kerchief. He said, "I always told Sir Edmund the truth. The jewels he sought were on the *Devon Rose*. He knew of this custom of hanging ship models in sailors' churches to insure a good voyage. Or maybe he didn't, not being a seagoing man."

He knelt and threw back the lids, one after the other. Lady Margaret gasped. Diamonds and rubies and ropes of pearls shone with an unearthly luster, where sunlight beaming through the stained windows threw them into focus. She came to kneel beside him, reaching out a hand to lift a massive emerald set in a thumb ring.

"There must be millions of pounds here, Michael. It's an even more fabulous treasure than the one Sir Francis Drake

took when he captured the *San Felipe*. No wonder the Spanish party wanted to get its hands on these. They'd have stirred up such a rebellion as might have cost the Queen her life and England its very liberty!"

She sat back on her heels and stared at him. "Men will say England owes its freedom of the seas to Drake and Hawkins. It owes it to you, darling! For not revealing the hiding place of these precious stones, for fighting the Spanish party as Captain Seadog, keeping them always off-balance and on guard, preventing a revolution by stealing their gold and harrying their leading members——"

"I'd give it all to have you as my wife," he said bitterly. Then his shoulders lifted in a shrug. "You'll have to help me sort them out, dearest. Some of them will go to the queen as her share in my venture."

"Michael——"

Lady Margaret bit her lip when he looked at her. She shook her head to his questions, laughed and kissed him, and would say nothing of what was on her mind. Only as they carried the caskets to the waiting coach did he catch a faint smile on her mouth and hidden laughter in her eyes.



## Chapter Fourteen

---

QUEEN ELIZABETH of England held a necklace of huge pearls to the candlelight which cast its shadows across the furniture of the long gallery in Windsor Castle. Back and forth she swung them, eyes glinting with pleasure at their translucent loveliness.

"For me?" she asked softly. "All of them?"

"The entire casket, Your Majesty," said Captain Michael Goddard.

He did not add that there were two other caskets equally as full of precious stones. He was acting on Meg's advice in this; she had been full of restrained excitement as she whispered to him, but she would not explain other than to ask him to be patient.

Meg stood beside him now as Lady Margaret Sutton, Duchess of Sunderland, in velvet bodice and farthingale and a white ruff which set off her dark beauty to perfection. Her eyes went from Michael to the Queen and then on to Lord Howard of Effingham.

One week before they had been in Plymouth. Michael had wanted to leave after bringing the three jewel caskets to the Sunderland town house. Meg would not permit it. "There is to be a court fete, dearest. Elizabeth has summoned Drake and Hawkins, Howard and the others to London. She wishes to extend her congratulations to you all."

"I'm only a commoner," he reminded her. "Court fetes are for the nobles, the great men in the land."

Hands on hips, fire in her cheeks, she faced him boldly. "And who in England is any greater than you, Captain Goddard?"

He smiled and kissed her hands but still refused to go until

she wept a little, saying he did not love her. She dried her tears only when he agreed—with many kisses and protestations of devotion—to accompany her to London and bring one of the jewel caskets with him.

“These others we’ll leave in the vault below the house,” Meg murmured, touching them with gentle fingertips. “Until such time as you have need of them.”

“They’re yours. I want no part of them. I’m off to the Main and——”

Her palm covered his mouth. “You’re off to London, sirrah! Or shall I weep another kerchief wet?”

Now he stood beside Meg facing Her Majesty, watching Howard stare down at a ruby the size of a pigeon’s egg, at Sir Francis Drake shaking his head over a crucifix shaped from a gigantic aquamarine. The Queen ran her fingers through the jewels, studying Michael with sharp eyes.

“Lord Howard,” she said softly, “I seem to recall the fact that you knighted a number of bold men who conducted themselves so admirably during the sea battles with the Armada off the Isle of Wight and Portland Bill. Your brother Thomas, I recall, and Roger Townsend, John Hawkins, Martin Frobisher and others.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“This Captain Goddard, now. It was his suggestion to use fireboats? He was in command of them?”

“Indeed, Majesty. And made the tactic such a great success we were able to achieve complete victory.”

“Ah! For this Captain Goddard has received no reward?”

“None to my knowledge.”

“Now I find he brings me a great treasure. And still asking nothing for himself, I might add.”

Michael felt his cheeks turn red with embarrassment. He stammered, “Highness, I s-seek nothing. I——”

“He didn’t even want to come,” Meg said pertly. “He wanted me to bring the casket while he ran off to the Spanish Main to steal more of Philip’s gold.”

Even Sir Francis Drake laughed at that.

“The man’s a very Hercules! I mind also some services he rendered me while traveling up and down the land as Captain

Seadog. Though he failed in his ambition to place certain proofs before me——”

“He offered those proofs as a sacrifice to buy my safety,” Meg snapped.

Elizabeth smiled gently and went on, “—nevertheless I’m confident he broke the back of the Spanish party and prevented a rebellion. So!

“Now what’s to be done with him?”

“A knighthood, certainly,” ventured Lord Howard.

“Even more than that, Effingham,” said Elizabeth very softly. “You see, our Goddard’s in love. Pish now, Captain! No need to look so awkward. We favor such a love as yours. The only drawback seems to be that Captain Goddard has no rank. Well, we can change that. Lord Howard, your sword! Kneel, Captain Goddard.”

Michael knelt, feeling as if he dreamed. He felt the touch of a steel blade on his shoulder and heard Elizabeth’s every word crystal clear.

“I dub thee knight, Michael Goddard, and lord of the realm, Earl of Hammerstowe, bestowing on you those lands formerly belonging to Edmund Morton, Lord Cavendish, as well as those holdings formerly of Sir Thomas Craydon. Rise, Sir Michael.”

Elizabeth handed back the sword to Lord Howard, then clapped her hands. “You see how he looks at her, gentlemen? He doesn’t really care anything about being an earl and owning so much land and property. All he cares about is his Meg. Which is as it should be. Sir Francis, your arm. We’ll leave the lovers alone for a little while.”

As she signaled her company to pass out before her, Elizabeth of England swung around. “We’ll see you married in the castle chapel this very evening, Meg. There’ll be a royal feast following it. After the feast I give you leave to return to Hampshire for a honeymoon.”

The door closed behind her and they were alone.

“An earl!” exclaimed Meg with laughter in her eyes. “Now you’ve risen so high in the world mayhap a duchess won’t be able to satisfy your ambitions.”

He gave her no chance to protest but caught and kissed her to breathlessness. After a moment he whispered against her

lips, "You planned this all, didn't you? That day in the friary chapel when you wouldn't tell me what you had in mind and even later——"

Her eyes laughed at him. "I had a few thoughts on the subject. I wrote a letter to Her Majesty, making suggestions, hinting that a goodly portion of the long-lost treasure of Captain Goddard was about to be tendered her as a gift."

"Meg, I don't deserve you!"

"I know that," she smiled teasingly, "but I love you just the same."

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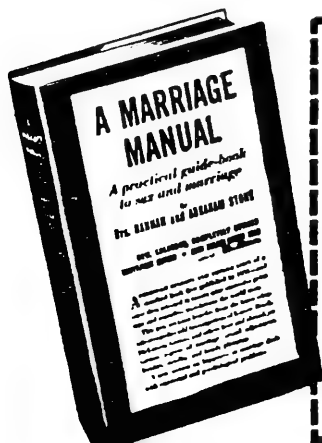
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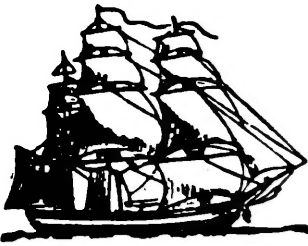
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